6536

Battles of Smolensk & Roslavl 1941

Hans Seidler

CONCORD
PUBLICATIONS COMPANY

6536

Battles of Smolensk & Roslavl 1941

Text by Hans Seidler
Color plates by Dmitriy Zgonnik

Copyright © 2010
by CONCORD PUBLICATIONS CO.
10/F, B1, 603-609 Castle Peak Road
Kong Nam Industrial Building
Tsuen Wan, New Territories
Hong Kong
www.concord-publications.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior written permission of Concord Publications Co.

We welcome authors who can help expand our range of books. If you would like to submit material, please feel free to contact us.

We are always on the look-out for new, unpublished photos for this series. If you have photos or slides or information you feel may be useful to future volumes, please send them to us for possible future publication. Full photo credits will be given upon publication.

ISBN 962-361-173-0
printed in Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

For the invasion of Russia, code-named Barbarossa, the German Army assembled some three million men, divided into a total of 105 infantry divisions and 32 Panzer divisions. There were 3,332 tanks, over 7,000 artillery pieces, 60,000 motor vehicles and 625,000 horses. This massive force was distributed into three German Army Groups: Heersgruppe Nord, commanded by Generalfeldmarschall Wilhelm Ritter von Leeb, had assembled his forces in East Prussia on the Lithuanian frontier. His force provided the main spearhead for the advance on Leningrad.

Heeresgruppe Mitte, commanded by Generalfeldmarschall Fedor von Bock, assembled on the 1939 Polish/Russian Frontier, both north and south of Warsaw. Bock's force consisted of 42 Infanterie-Divisions of the 4. and 9.Armee and Panzergruppen II and III. This army contained the largest number of German Infantry- and Panzer-Divisions in all three army groups.

Heeresgruppe Süd, commanded by Generalfeldmarschall Gerd von Rundstedt was deployed down the longest stretch of border with Russia. The front, reaching from central Poland to the Black Sea, was held by one Panzergruppe, three German and two Rumanian armies, plus a Hungarian motorized corps, under German command.

During the early morning of 22 June 1941, the German Army finally unleashed the maelstrom that was Barbarossa. Both the Infanterie- and Panzer-Divisions wasted no time and soon sliced through the bewildered Russian forces on every front. The ferocity and effectiveness of both the Infanterie- and Panzer-Divisions were so great that some of the Red Army forces they surrounded were gigantic. Groups of up to fifteen Russia divisions were trapped at a time and slowly and systematically annihilated in a hurricane of fire.

The strongest army group, Heeresgruppe Mitte, made a series of heavy penetrating drives through the Russian heartlands, bulldozing through the marshy ground to the main Russian defenses. Within days of its first attacks across the frontier both the Infanterie- and Panzer-Divisions had pulverized bewildered Russian formations, which led to a string of victories along its entire front.

The ultimate objective of Heeresgruppe Mitte was to spearhead as rapidly as possible eastwards to the city of Smolensk, which commanded the road to the Russian capital, Moscow. Facing this impressive array of German might along the River Dnieper and Dvina were groups of heavily defended fortifications called the Stalin Line. The defenders were the Russian 13th Army of the West Front, and the 20th Army, 21st Army and the 22nd Army of the Supreme Command (STAVKA) Reserve. In the region around the strategic city of Vitebsk the 19th Army was ordered to hold it at all costs, whilst the 16th Army was hastily moved in front of Smolensk. It was the threat in the north from 3.Panzer-Armee and 39.Panzer-Korps that seriously worry the Red Army. However, in spite this concern Stalin had called for a Great Patriotic War against the Nazi invader, and every soldier was determined to do his duty and hold its lines to the grim death. As Heeresgruppe Mitte continued a general push towards Smolensk in early July 1941, the Russians began a more determined defense. Many bridges were blown up and, for the first time, the Red Army units began laying mines to slow down the Germans. To make matters worse for both the Infanterie- and Panzer-Divisions heavy rain, typical for July in central Russia, suddenly began turning the roads into streaming rivers of mud, and advancing German units found themselves either slowing down to a painful snail's pace or totally immobile for hours at a time.

The German delays gave the Soviets time to organize for a massive armored counter blow.

On 6 July, the Russians finally launched their attack in front of Smolensk with the Soviet 20th Army's 7th and 5th Mechanized Corps attacking advancing German troops and armor with 700 tanks. What followed was the battle of Smolensk with Red Army infantry bitterly contesting every part of ground along the Dnieper River.

To meet the Russian force was Guderian's Panzergruppe, which was advancing steadily eastwards, along three separate axis. The most northerly of these which ran from the Dnieper crossings below Orsha, along the line Dubrovno-Lyady-Krasny-Smolensk. This was under the 57.Korps, with the 29.Motorized-Division leading the 17. and 18.Panzer-Divisions. In the center the 56.Korps advanced from Mogilev with the 10.Panzer-Division, SS Das-Reich, and Guard Battalion of Großdeutschland. To the south, up the winding valley of Oster, came the 24.Korps, with the 10.Motorized-Division, the 3. and 4.Panzer-Divisions, and the cavalry division, all of which were converging toward Smolensk. For the Red Army the Battle of Smolensk would take place in several phases, divided into distinct operations to halt the German offensive and the armored pincers.

In spite relatively strong Russian defensive positions by the second week of July the 3.Panzergruppe's 20.Panzer-Division established a bridgehead on the east bank of the River Dvina and threatened Vitebsk. To the south, away from the main crossings, the 2.Panzergruppe launched surprise attacks forcing the River Dnieper. The Soviet 13th Army was pushed back, losing 5 divisions. As both German Panzer Armies drove east, three Soviet Armies, the 20th, 19th and 16th faced the prospect of encirclement around Smolensk.

Meanwhile south of Smolensk, Guderian's 2.Panzergruppe bulldozed its way through Soviet lines. What followed was intensive fighting. Armor and troops from the 29.Motorized-Infanterie-Division in a series of successive attacks blasted its way through towards the city. Soviet soldiers either fought to the death or save themselves by escaping the impending slaughter by withdrawing to another makeshift position. During the early morning of 16 July fighting intensified with even greater losses to the Russians. The battles that took place in and around Smolensk became a fierce contest of attrition, and although the Russians showed great fortitude and determination, they were constantly hampered by lack of weapons and manpower needed to sustain them on the battlefield. Consequently, the remaining troops holding out in the city were subjected to merciless ground and aerial bombardments. The situation for the defenders looked grim. The ferocity of the German attack was immense and without respite. After nearly twenty-four hours of almost continuous battle the Russian soldiers had become exhausted. Stalin's insistence that his troops must fight from fixed positions without any tactical retreat had consequently caused many units to become encircled, leaving tank units to speed past unhindered and achieve even deeper penetrations.

By the early afternoon of 16 July Smolensk was finally captured by 29.Motorized-Infanerie-Division. In the north, Hoth's 3.Panzergruppe was moving much more slowly. The terrain was swampy and the rain was still hampering operations in a number of places. The Russians were fighting desperately to escape the trap that was developing. On 18 July, the great armored pincers of the two German Panzer Armies came within 10 miles of closing the gap. But the jaws would not finally snap shut and bitter fighting raged for more than a week.

Heeresgruppe Mitte
Smolensk Order of Battle
2. Panzergruppe
255. Infanterie-Division
817. 21cm Mörser-Abt. (mot.)
740. 15cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
5. Machinengewehr-Btl. (mot.)
602. leichtes Flak-Btl.
101., 104. Flak Rgt. Stab. (LW)
77., 91., 94 leichtes Flak-Btl. (LW)
I./11., II./11., I./12., I./22. Flak Abt. (gem.) (LW)

XII. Armeekorps
31., 34., 45. Infanterie-Divisionen
617., 788. Artillerie-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
192., 201. Sturmgeschütz-Abt.
430., 709. 10cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
II./66, 845. schwere Feldhaubitzen-Abt. (mot.)
II./109., 854. 21cm Mörser-Abt. (mot.)
2./833. schwerste Mörser-Abt. (mot.) (Karl-Gerät)
507. Pionier-Rgt. Stab (mot.)

215., 750. Pionier-Btl (besp.)
24. Kdr. der Bautruppen
11., 46., 402. Bau-Btl.
4. Nebelwerfer-Rgt. (mot.)
6., Nebelwerfer-Abt. (mot.)
8. Nebelwerfer-Abt. (mot.) (28/32cm sWG 40)
105. Entgiftungs-Abt. (28/32cm sWG 40)
654. Panzerjäger-Abt. (3.7cm mot.)
610. leichte Flak-Btl.
3./31. leichte Flak-Kp.

XXIV. Armeekorps (mot.)
3., 4. Panzer-Divisionen
10. Infanterie-Division (mot.)
1. Kavallerie-Division
267. Infanterie-Division
623. Artillerie-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
II./69. 10cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
II./42. schwere Feldhaubitzen-Abt. (mot.)
616. 21cm Mörser-Abt. (mot.)
515. Pionier-Rgt. (mot.)
45. Pionier-Btl. (mot.)
I./53 Nebelwerfer-Abt. (d.) (mot.)
Lehr-Aufklärungs-Abt. (mot.)
521. Panzerjäger-Abt. (4.7cm mot.)
10cm Kanone-Zug (gep. Sfl.)

XXXXVI. Armeekorps (mot.)
10. Panzer Division
SS-Infanterie-Division (mot.) Reich
Infanterie-Rgt. (mot.) Großdeutschland
513. Pionier-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
85. Pionier-Btl. (mot.)

XXXXVII. Armeekorps (mot.)
17., 18. Panzer-Divisionen
29. Infanterie-Division (mot.)
167. Infanterie-Division
792. Artillerie-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
831. 10cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
II./71. gemischte Artillerie-Abt. (mot.)
422. schwere Feldhaubitzen-Abt. (mot.)
604. 21cm Mörser-Abt. (mot.)
413. Pionier-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
42. Pionier-Btl. (mot.)
53. Nebelwerfer-Rgt. (d) (mot.) (ohne I. Abt.)
611. Panzerjäger-Abt. (4.7cm Sfl.)
100. Flammpanzer-Abt.

3. Panzergruppe
149. Flak-Rgt. Stab (LW)
1. Batterie I./36. Flak-Abt. (gem) (LW)

V. Armeekorps
5., 35. Infanterie-Divisionen
842. 10cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
847. schwere Feldhaubitzen-Abt. (mot.)
745. Pionier-Btl. (besp.)
104. Kdr. der Bautruppen
154., 218. Bau-Btl.

VI. Armeekorps
6., 26. Infanterie-Divisionen
II./57. 10cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
848. schwere Feldhaubitzen-Abt. (mot.)
742., 743., 754. Pionier-Btl. (besp.)
10. Kdr. der Bautruppen
22., 80., 320., 321. Bau-Btl.
1./46. 6./47. leichte Flak-Kp.

XXXIX. Armeekorps (mot.)
7., 20.Panzer-Divisionen
14., 20., Infanterie-Divisionen (mot.)
69. Artillerie-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
II./70. gemischte Artillerie-Abt. (mot.)
733. 21cm Mörser-Abt. (mot.)
620. 15cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
614. Pionier-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
Lehr, 1. Pionier-Btl. (mot.)
51. Nebelwerfer-Rgt. (d) (mot.)
643. Panzerjäger-Abt. (4.7cm Sfl.)
1./8 Panzerjäger-Kp. (8.8cm Sfl.)
605. leichtes Flak-Btl.
101. Flammpanzer-Abt.
74., 84. leichte Flak-Abt. (LW)
I./36 Flak-Abt. (gem.) (LW) (ohne ein Batterie)

LVII. Armeekorps (mot.)
12., 19. Panzer-Divisionen
18. Infanterie-Divisionen (mot.)
427. gemischte Artillerie-Abt. (mot.)
II./55. schwere Feldhaubitzen-Abt. (mot.)
816. 21cm Kanonen-Abt. (mot.)
504. Pionier-Rgt. Stab (mot.)
47. Pionier-Btl. (mot.)
75., 85. leichtes Flak-Abt. (LW)
I./29 Flak-Abt. (gem.) (LW)

Whilst the battle of Smolensk raged and the German's tried liquidating the Smolensk pocket with some 500,000 Soviet troops fighting inside, General Guderian immediately set about implementing plans to crush Soviet forces, further east around the town of Roslavl. The operation had taken the Red Army by complete surprise. The sudden speed and depth of the German attack was a brilliant display of all-arms coordination. The Soviets were quite unprepared for the might of the German attack. In some areas along the front units were simply brushed aside and totally destroyed. Red Army survivors recalled that they had been caught off guard, lulled into a false sense of security after escaping from the Smolensk pocket. Now they were being attacked by highly mobile armor and blasted by heavy artillery. In many places the force of attack was so heavy that they were unable to organize any type of defense. In total confusion, hundreds of troops, disheartened and frightened, retreated to avoid the slaughter, whilst other more fanatical units remained ruthlessly defending their positions to the death. On 1 August, Guderian's force launched his Roslavl offensive. The Russian force that was thrown in to the German attack was remnants from the battle of Smolensk. They were completely exhausted, short of ammunition and vulnerable. On the right wing of the German attack stood the 4.Panzer-Division which broke into open country within a few hours and ripped across the Russian front. The armored division, with infantry trailing to the rear, advanced nearly 30-miles, and by evening of 2 August was outside the town of Roslavl. The 29.Motorized-Division, had meanwhile pushed steadily down the valley of the Desna. The Russians tried desperately to hold onto the town of Roslavl, but under direct attack by seven fresh German infantry divisions, the defense soon crumbled away. Around the town a pocket soon began to form, with Germans bringing up greater artillery concentration, whilst Red Army troops feebly trying to break out. Roslavl finally fell to the Germans on 3 August. Guderian order a Panzer striking force of three divisions immediately ordered away from the main battle to probe southwards and clear up stragglers from both Smolensk and Roslavl.

The battles of Smolensk and Roslavl was one of the swiftest as well as one of the most complete German Army victories in the East. Altogether some 300,000 Soviet soldiers had been captured in the Smolensk pocket. However, 200,000 had managed to break out and fight in Roslavl and surrounding areas further east. What Red Army troops were left from both battles was used to stand between the Germans and Moscow as Heeresgruppe Mitte desperately tried to reach the Russian capital before winter.

A freshly clad rifle company moves towards the front after the opening phase of Barbarossa in late June 1941. The Landser was very well-equipped as an individual soldier. Here in this photograph the infantry are seen with their M35 steel helmets attached to their rifleman's leather belt.

A column of vehicles including a motorcycle combination and an Sd.Kfz.6 halftrack armed with a shielded 3.7cm Flak 36, negotiates a typical Russian road in the summer of 1941. Tarpaulin sheeting has covered much of the flak gun in order to protect it from dust.

A staff officer salutes two generals during the early phase of Operation Barbarossa in Heeresgruppe Mitte in late June early July 1941. The staff officer has given one of the generals a piece of paper, which probably is a situation report. The divisional staff typically consisted of the commander, a lieutenant general, and numerous specialised staff officers, their assistants, and support personnel.

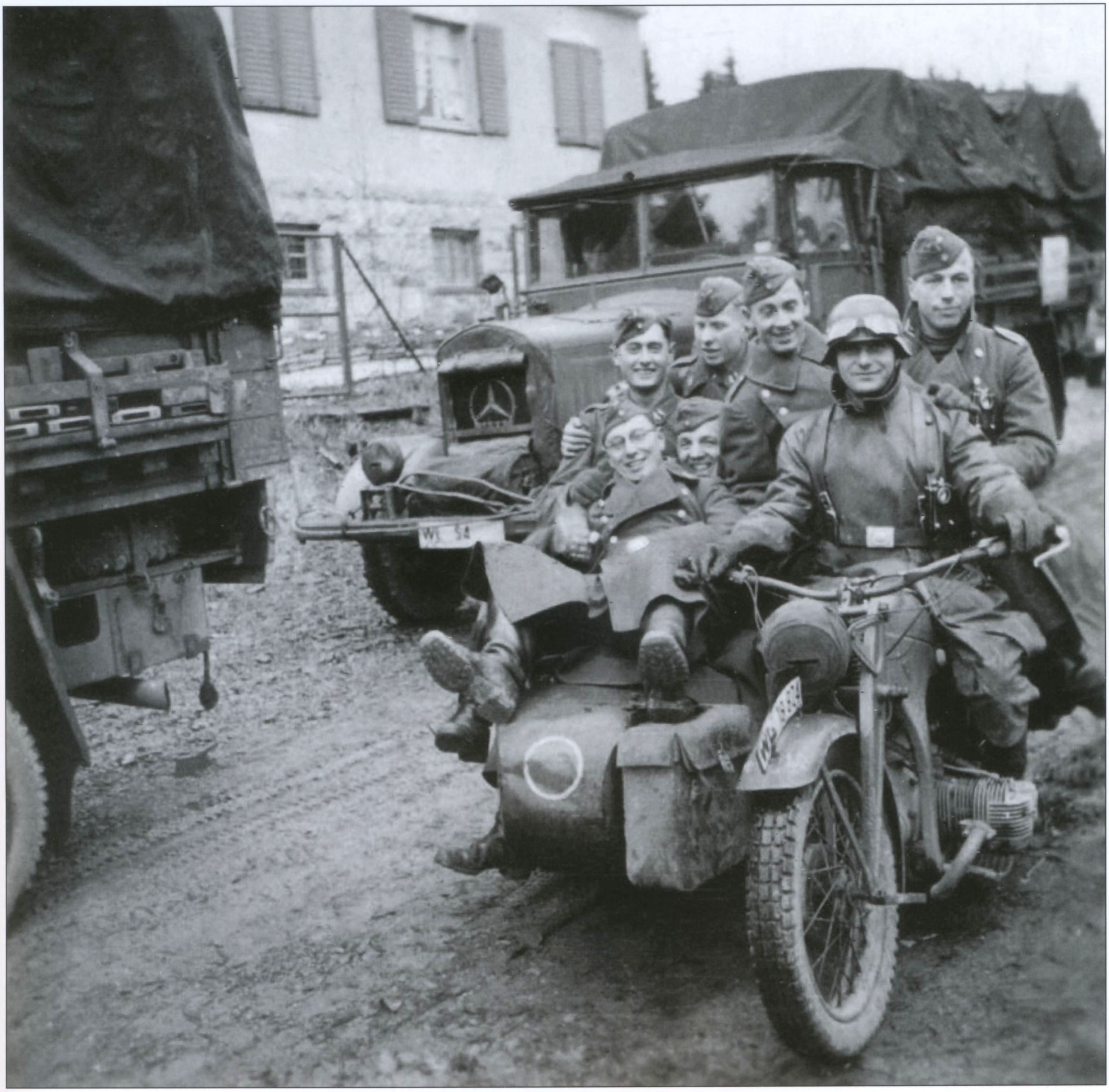
Two officers confer with the aid of maps the next operational move on the central front. Within the first week of the lightning strike against the bewildered Russian force, Heeresgruppe Mitte were advancing at speed towards their main objective, the city of Smolensk.

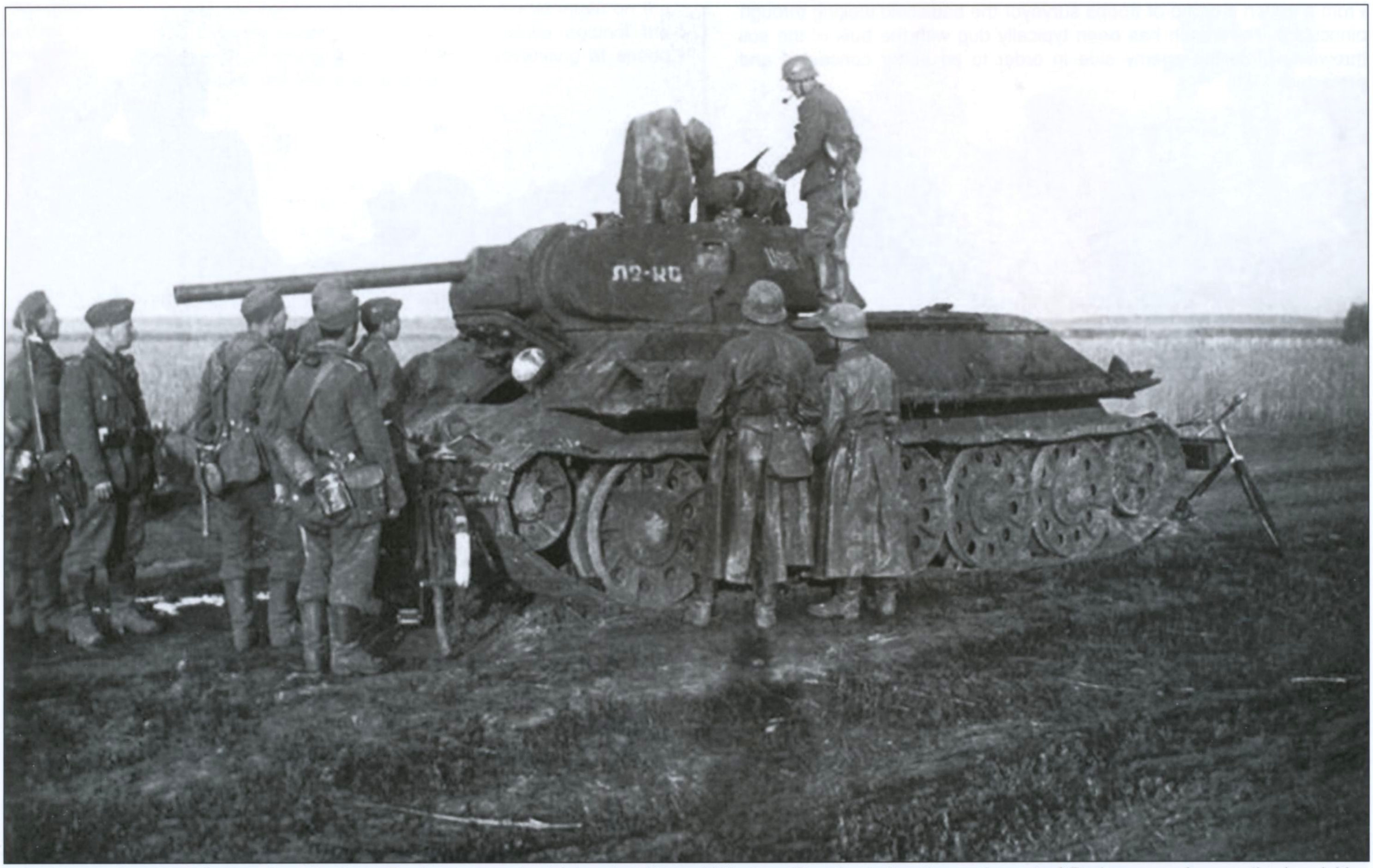
Infantry march forward towards the front. A typical infantry division consisted of three infantry regiments, an artillery regiment, reconnaissance, anti-tank, pioneer, and signal battalions, plus divisional services. Trucks transported much of the supporting battalions, but there were many infantry that marched on foot including all the supply columns that were horse-drawn.

A column of soldiers on a dusty road advance towards Smolensk in July 1941, escorted by a single-axel Maschinengewehr-Doppelwagen 36 (twin machine-gun wagon), which is being towed by horse.

From a trench a group of troops surveyor the battlefield looking through binoculars. The trench has been typically dug with the bulk of the soil thrown towards the enemy side in order to be better concealed and protected.

A comical photo showing a group of Luftwaffen personnel hitching a lift on a motorcycle combination. All the men are wearing the standard Greatcoat, whilst the motorcyclist is typically dressed in the familiar motorcycle rubberized coat. Motorcyclists could be found in every unit of an Infantrie- and Panzer-Division, especially during the early part of the war. They were even incorporated in the divisional staffs, which included a motorcycle messenger platoon.

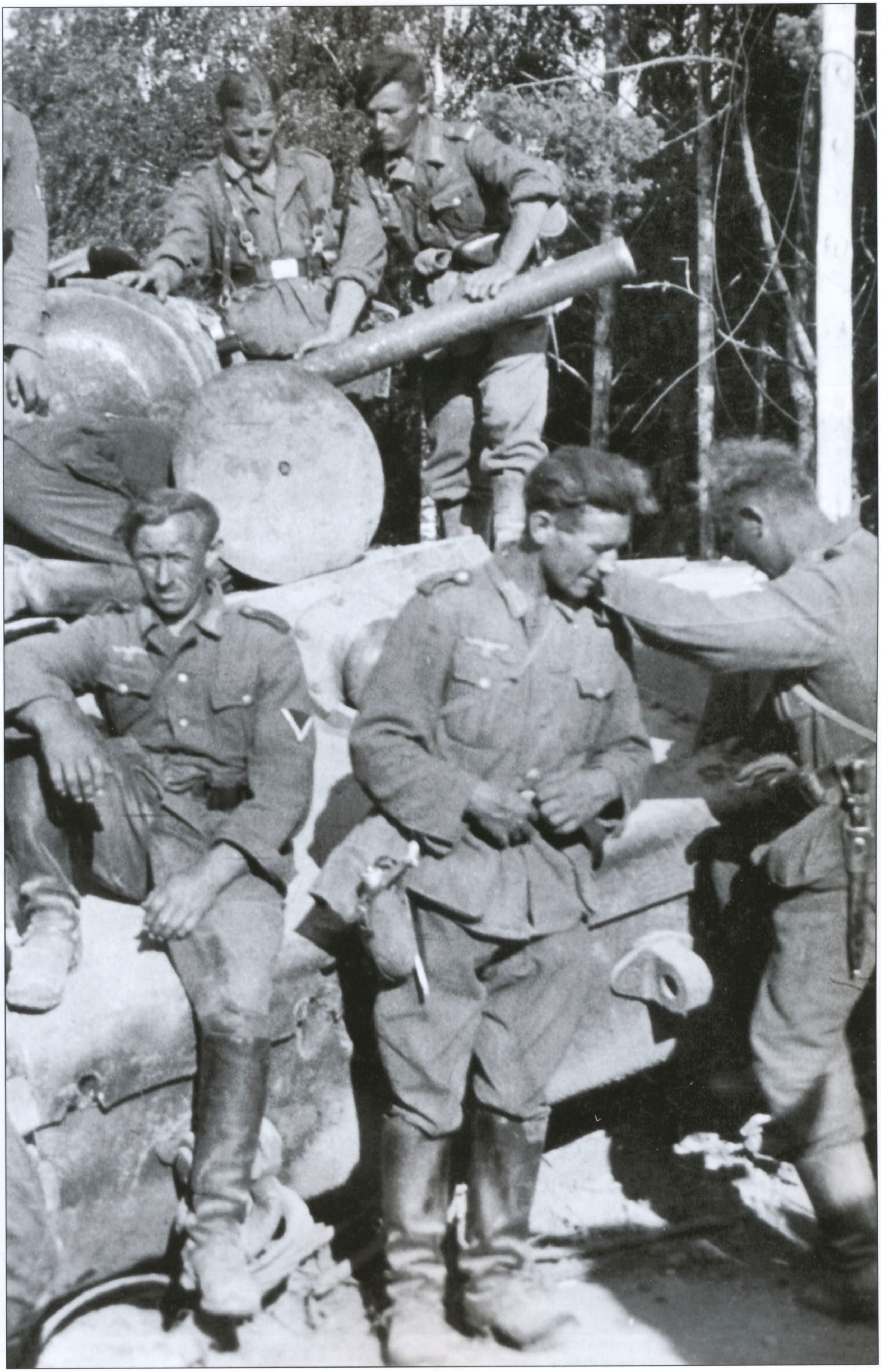




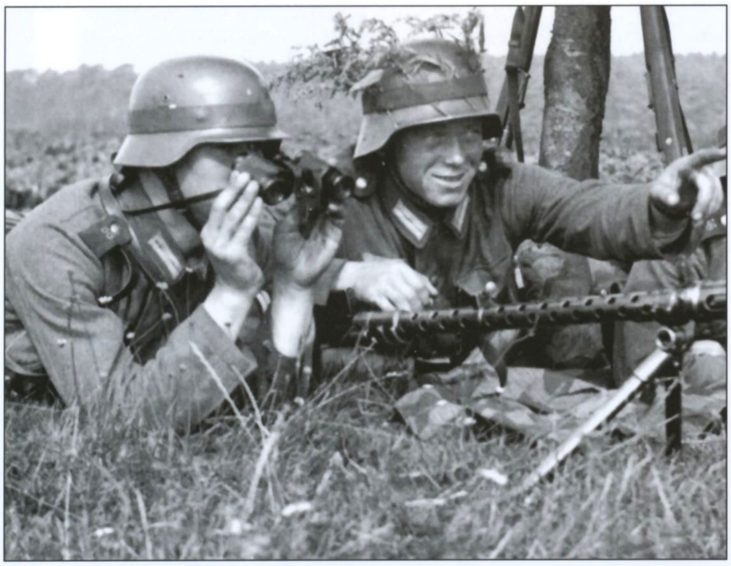
Troops examine one of many knocked out Soviet armored vehicles that littered Western Russia during the early part of Barbarossa. Among the inquisitive soldiers are seen two motorcyclists. It shows them wearing the motorcycle coat with M1935 steel helmet. All motorcycle units and individual motorcyclists, regardless of rank, were issued with the loose-fitting, rubberized coat. The tail of the coat could be gathered in around the wearer's legs and buttoned in position to allow easier movement while on the motorcycle.

Two officers take a much needed break from the heavy workload of planning and coordinating the drive on Smolensk, and tuck into some soup, which has been served on plates.

In the pouring rain a column of motorcycle combinations drive along a road passing a column of horse drawn transport. During early July heavy rain hampered Heeresgruppe Mitte's drive on Smolensk and as a consequence slowed the advance in a number of places.

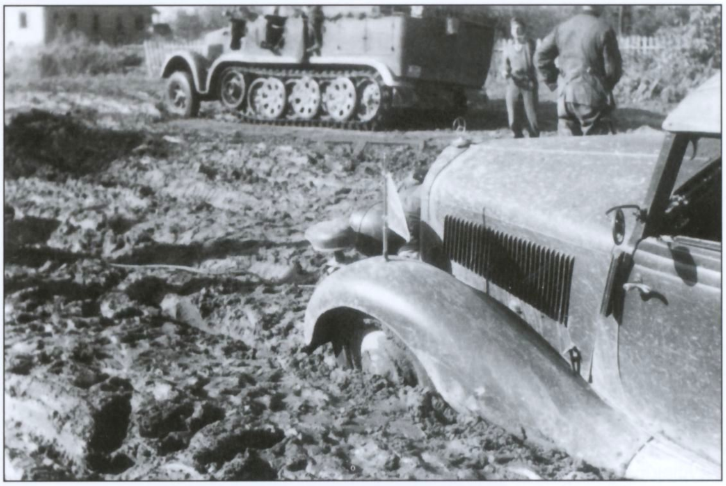


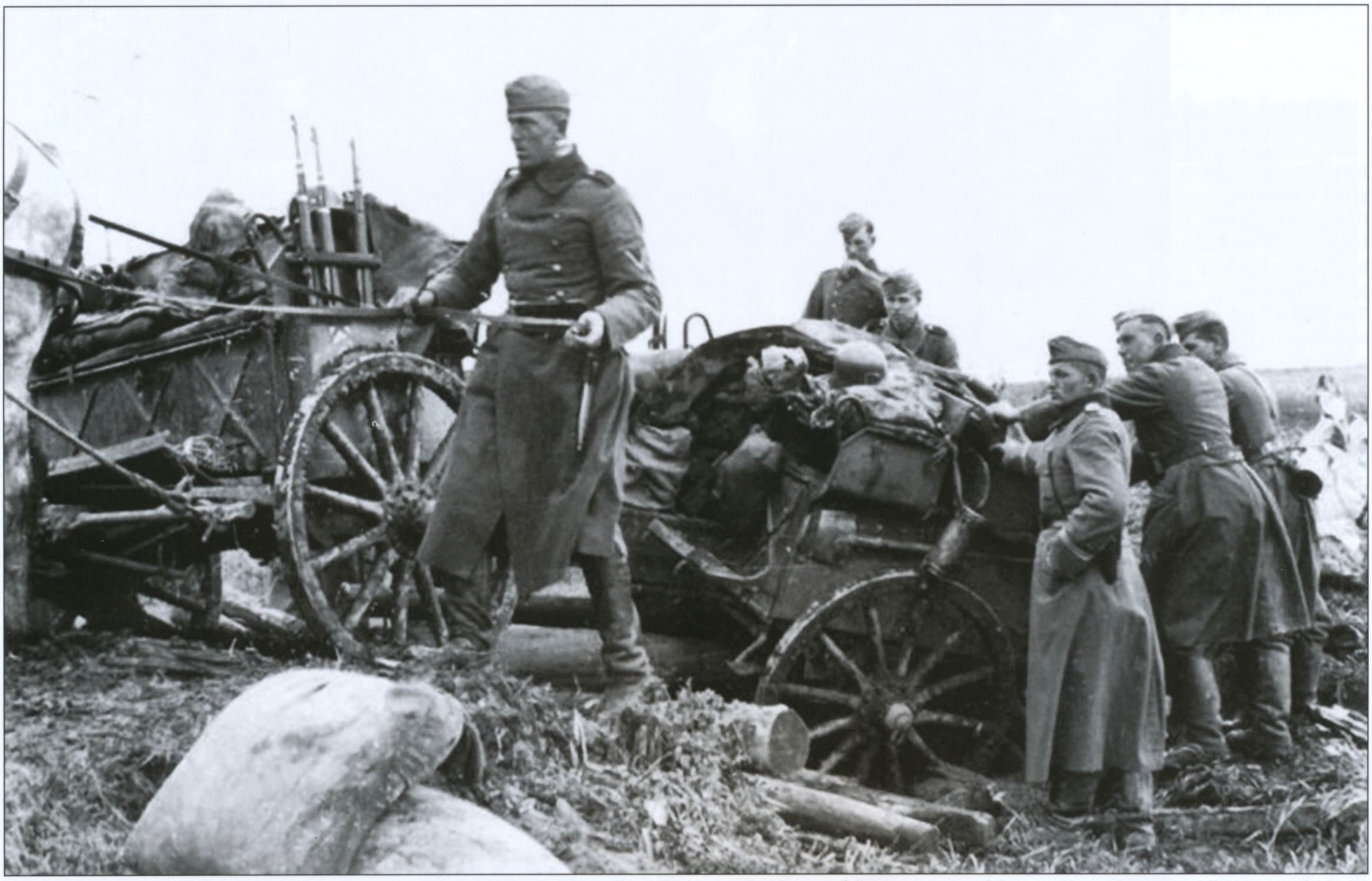
Infantry can be seen examining a destroyed Soviet tank following intensive fighting towards Smolensk. The soldiers are all wearing the standard M36 service uniform. The German national emblem of an eagle with outstretched wings clutching in its claws a wreath containing a swastika can be seen positioned on the right breast of the service tunic. The uniform had four box-pleated patch pockets; five field-grey finished metals buttons were positioned down the front of the tunic with another button to each four of the pockets.



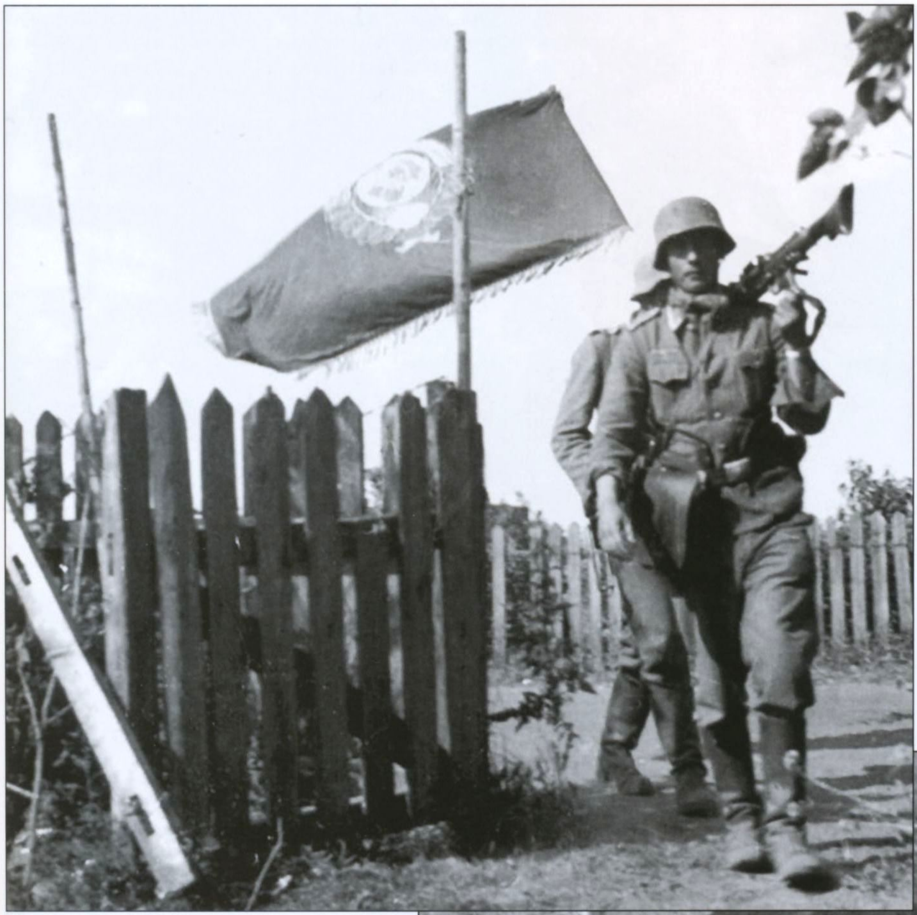
A light machine gun troop (MG-Trupp) are seen here trying to indentify an enemy target. Although a machine gun troop was normally a three man squad, due to the high casualty rates suffered on the Eastern Front they were commonly reduced to just two, but still highly effective.

A staff vehicle has become stuck in mud along a typical Russia road during the advance of Heeresgruppe Mitte in July 1941. An Sd.Kfz.7 halftrack can be seen halted on the side of the road with the crew more than likely contemplating towing the stranded vehicle out. The mud produced from a few hours of rain in Russia was enough to immobilize whole columns of wheeled transport, even tanks.

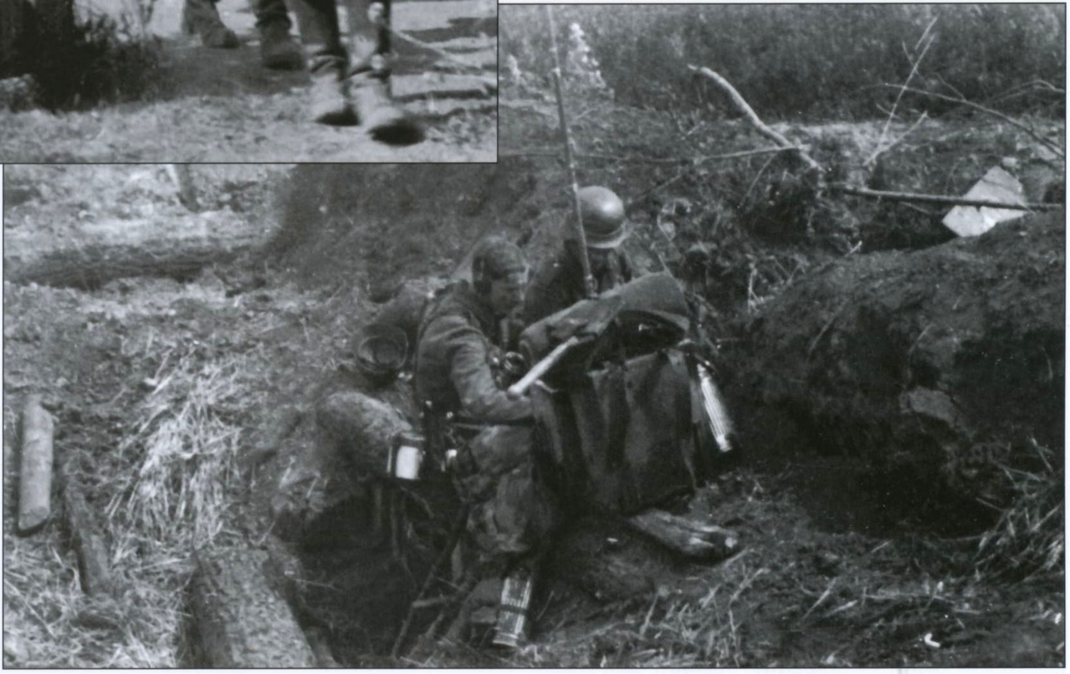




Across uneven muddy ground artillerymen struggle with the unit's artillery limber and caisson. Often crewmen riding on the caisson and limber would have to follow on foot to reduce the load's weight in the mud and rough ground.



An MG34 machine gun team march through a deserted farmstead. The MG34 is being carried by a quad leader (Gruppenführer).



Inside a freshly-dug position and radiomen can be seen with a Tornisterfunkgerät b1 (Torn. Fu. b1 (S/E), or "pack radio". These portable radio sets were widely used on the Eastern Front and were carried in two parts by the radiomen on specially designed back-pack frames.

A seemingly never ending march forward across the vast expanse of Soviet Russia. Here infantry move towards the front. All the soldiers wear a host of personal equipment that is worn with the M36 field service uniform. The sleeves of the tunic have been rolled up in order to try and reduce the wearer from the daytime temperatures, which were often very warm, especially in the summertime in central and southern Russia.

Infantry come across local peasants from a nearby village. Often the soldiers found the peasants very amenable and were given food and a host of other provisions before continuing their advance.

A motorcyclist has halted on a road. In 1941 motorcyclists were used extensively for reconnaissance duties. Their very versatile machines enabled them to survey enemy positions until they encountered enemy fire and then return swiftly with important data and other pieces of vital information relating to the location and strength of the enemy.

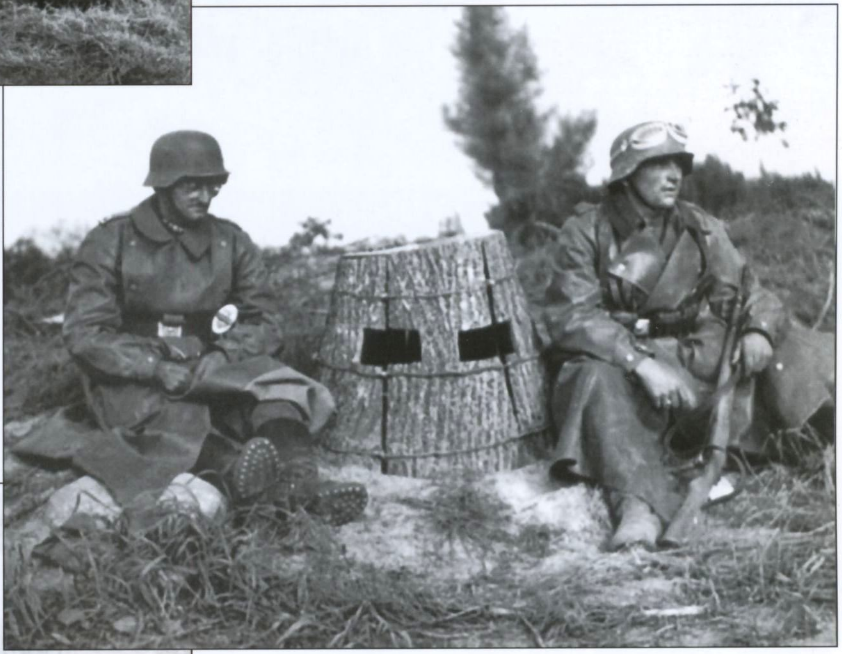
Troops wade across a field with full kit. For these soldiers Russia proved to be a totally alien environment. The vast open spaces, with endless horizons and lack of landmarks for guidance, were constant problem for the Landser. In the summer months of 1941, in spite the successful advance by Heeresgruppe Mitte, soldiers complained bitterly of mosquitoes and flies.

Landser advance along a typical road in central Russia in early July 1941. Almost as soon as the German soldier entered Russia he found how extremely crude and sparse the road network was. The dust and the heat was a never ending problem and when it rained the dirt roads were immediately turned into a quagmire bringing the rapid advance to a crawl in many places.

Troops rest in a field during their rapid advance. The first weeks in Russia were very exhausting for the German soldier and the miles covered every day were extremely overtaxing. In fact during the initial stages of the invasion a distance of some 150 to 200 miles had to be fought across before the actual frontier of the Soviet Union was achieved.

Infantrymen set-up position inside a captured trench. In the distance a Soviet vehicle still burns, which suggests that these soldiers have just occupied this position.

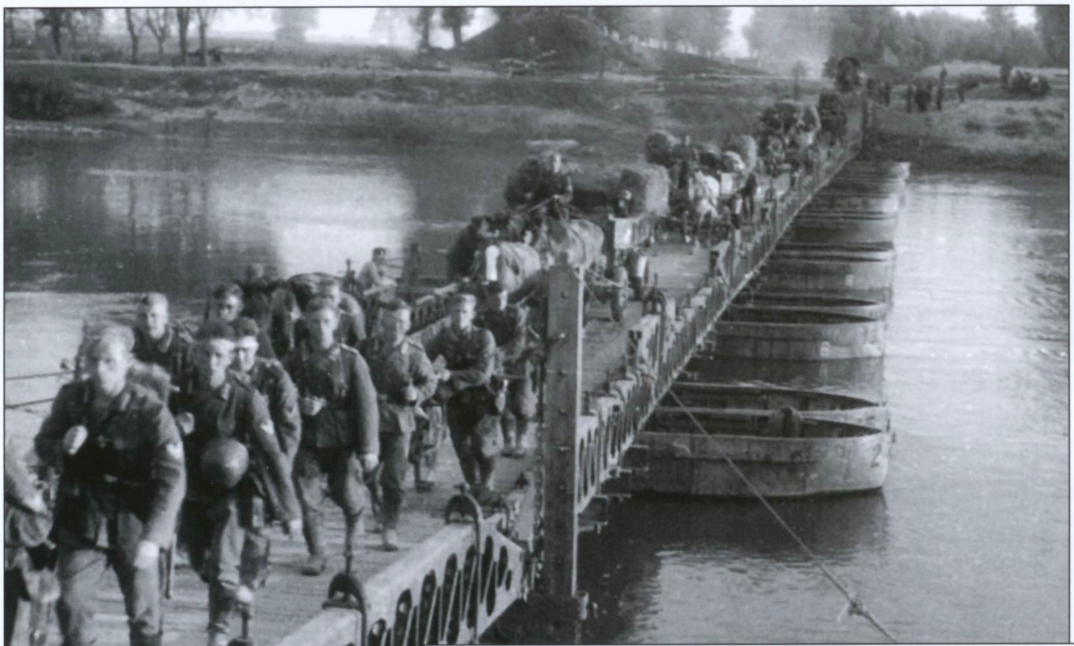
Two motorcyclists rest beside what appears to be a Russian observation post, constructed out of a tree trunk with two cut slits. The Soviet observer would sit inside a trench or hole beneath this look-out and observe the area a head through the two slits.



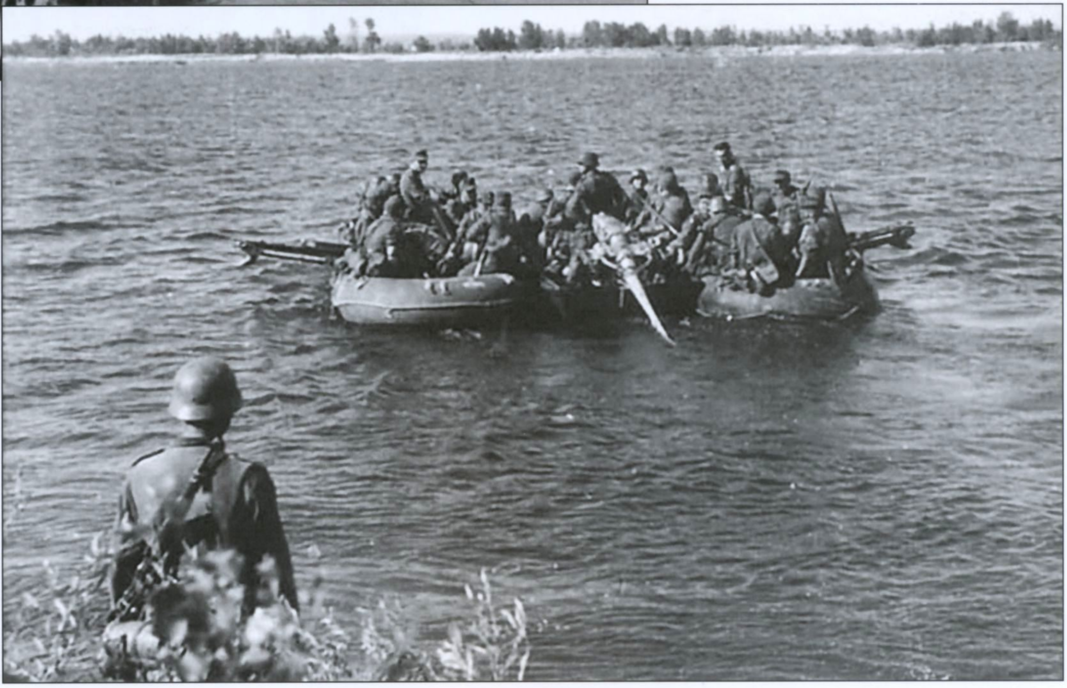
Two infantrymen at rest. One soldier is armed with the excellent 7.92mm Kar98k carbine, a compact and reliable bolt-action Mauser design, and the other infantryman who is a unit leader, carries the 9mm MP38/40 machine pistol, one of the most effective submachine guns ever produced.

A command group scan the terrain ahead for enemy activity and suitable movement routes. By the second week of the invasion Panzer divisions of Heeresgruppe Mitte had raced far ahead of the infantry, capturing thousands of prisoners and masses of equipment. However, by the first week of July commanders were deeply concerned about maintaining the momentum due to the bad road system, rain, and increased length of supply lines.

An infantryman smiles for the camera with a local peasant during the German drive on Smolensk. Although some Russian civilians tried to defend their homes and farmsteads against the Germans, most were too frightened, and reluctantly welcomed their conquerors.

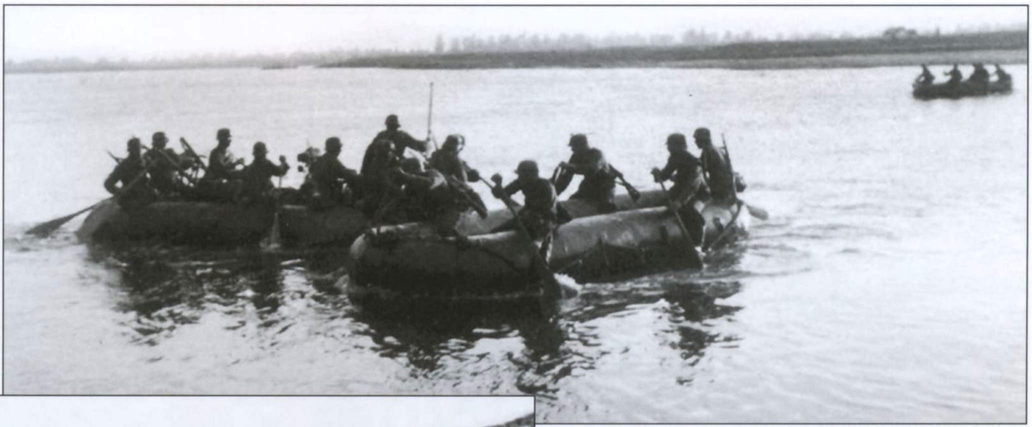


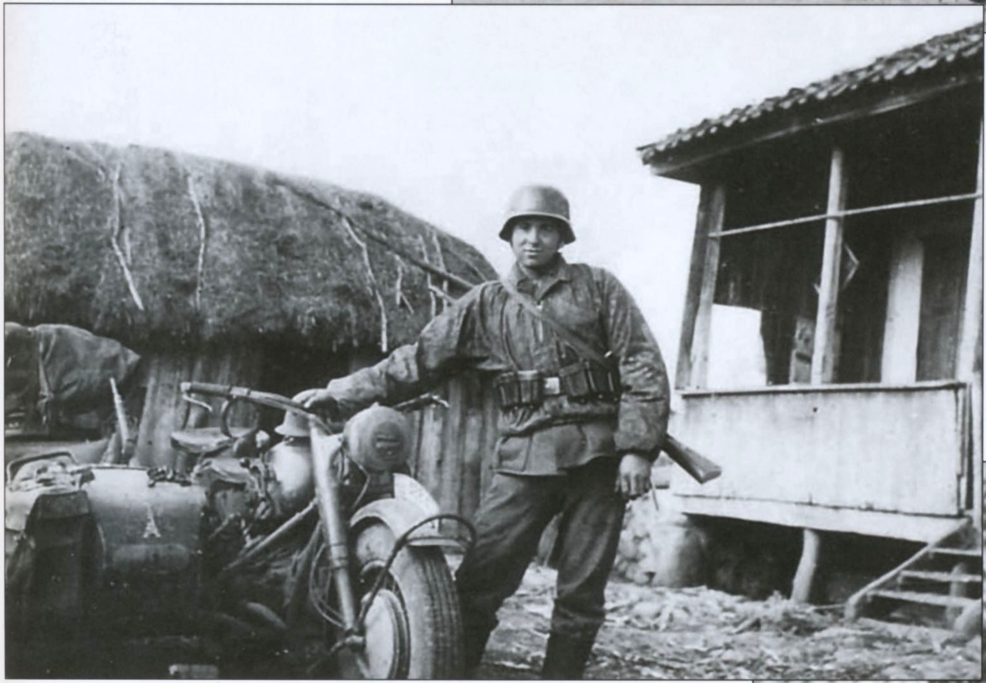
Infantry and horse drawn supply wagons cross a pontoon bridge. Because of the large numbers of rivers and streams encountered during the advance all kinds of bridging and river crossings were essential if the Germans were to successfully achieve their objectives.



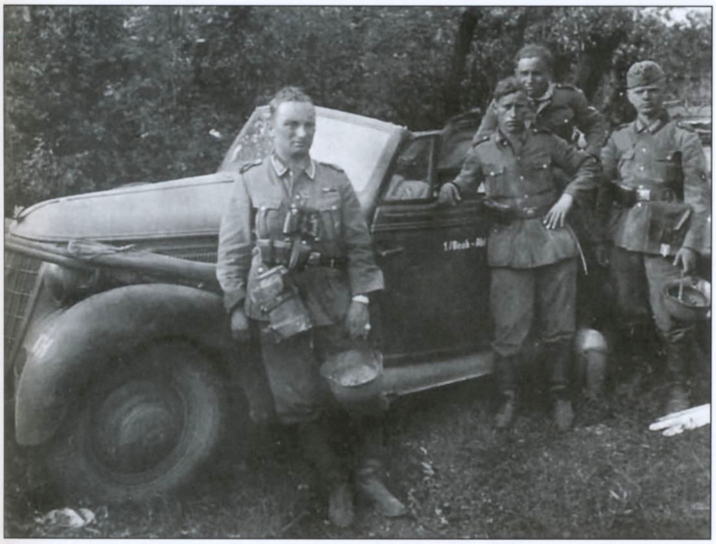
Another means of crossing rivers was by pontoon boat. Here in this photograph a motor-boat has attached both the pontoons and is being hastily driven across the river to the far bank in order for the assault troops to disembark more rapidly.

Six meter inflatable boats have been pressed into service by assault troops. Two paddles either side was normally sufficient enough for the boats to be propelled through the water, even when carrying a full complement of infantry onboard with heavy weapons and equipment.

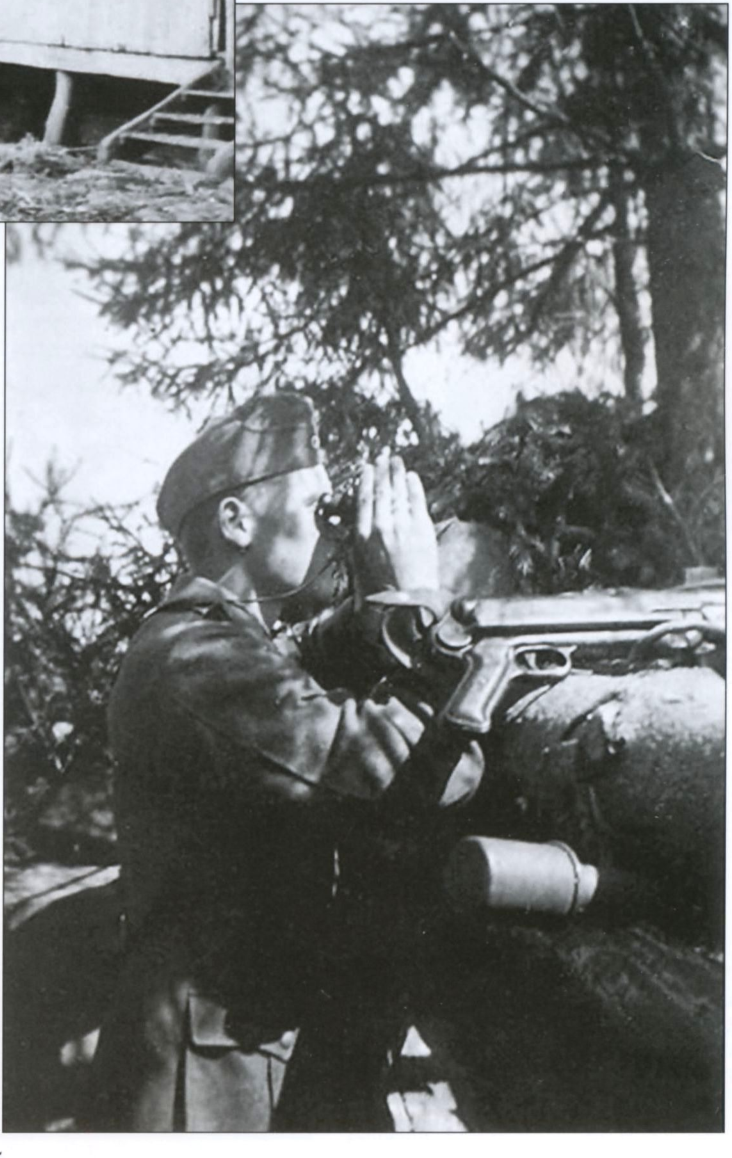




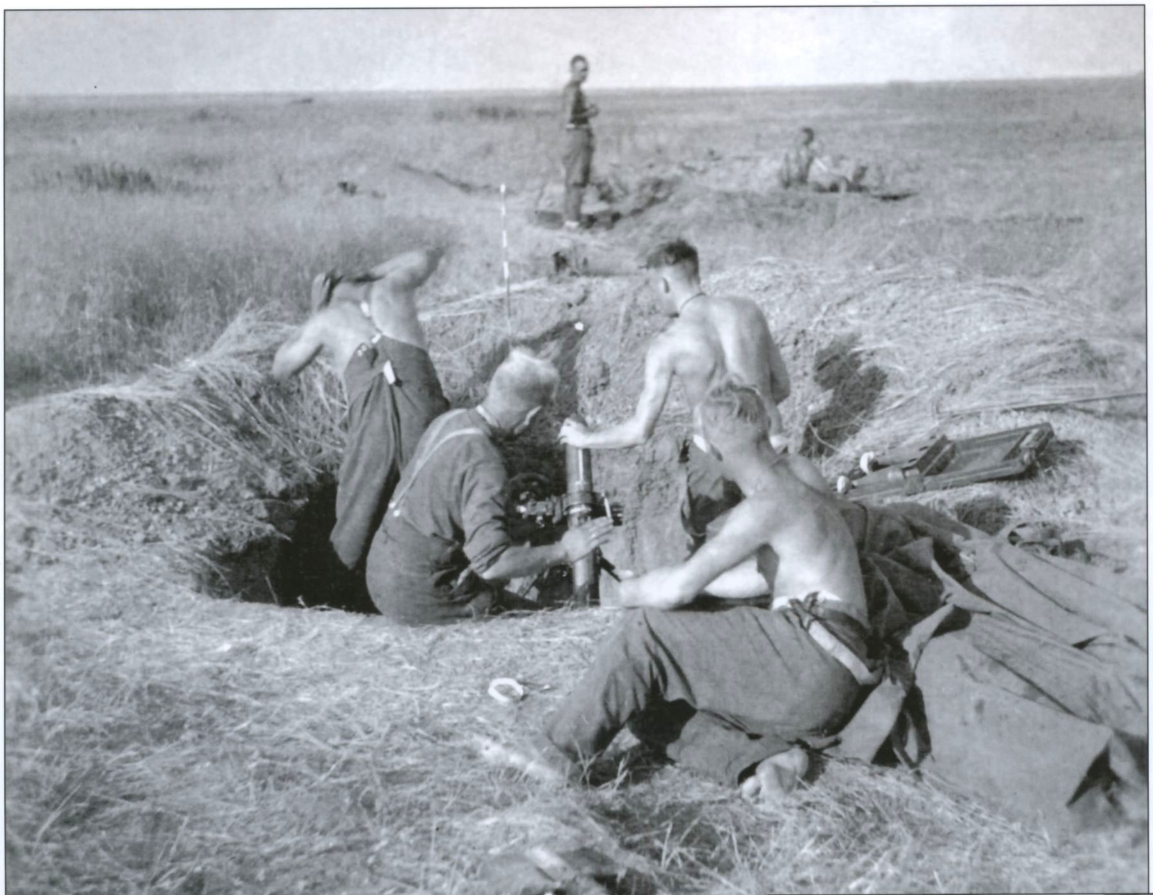
A Waffen-SS soldier with his motorcycle combination. He wears the distinctive plain-leaf camouflaged smock over his tunic and is armed with a 7.92mm Kar98k carbine. This soldier probably belongs to the 2.SS 'Das Reich' Division as this force fought in the battle of Yelnya near Smolensk, and then in the spearhead to capture Moscow.



A group of Landser with their troop leader has halted during their advance and can be seen standing next to a vehicle. Their leather belts can be seen carrying one set of three ammunition pouches for a total of 30 rounds for their carbine. The troop leader also wears a pair of 6x30 field binoculars.

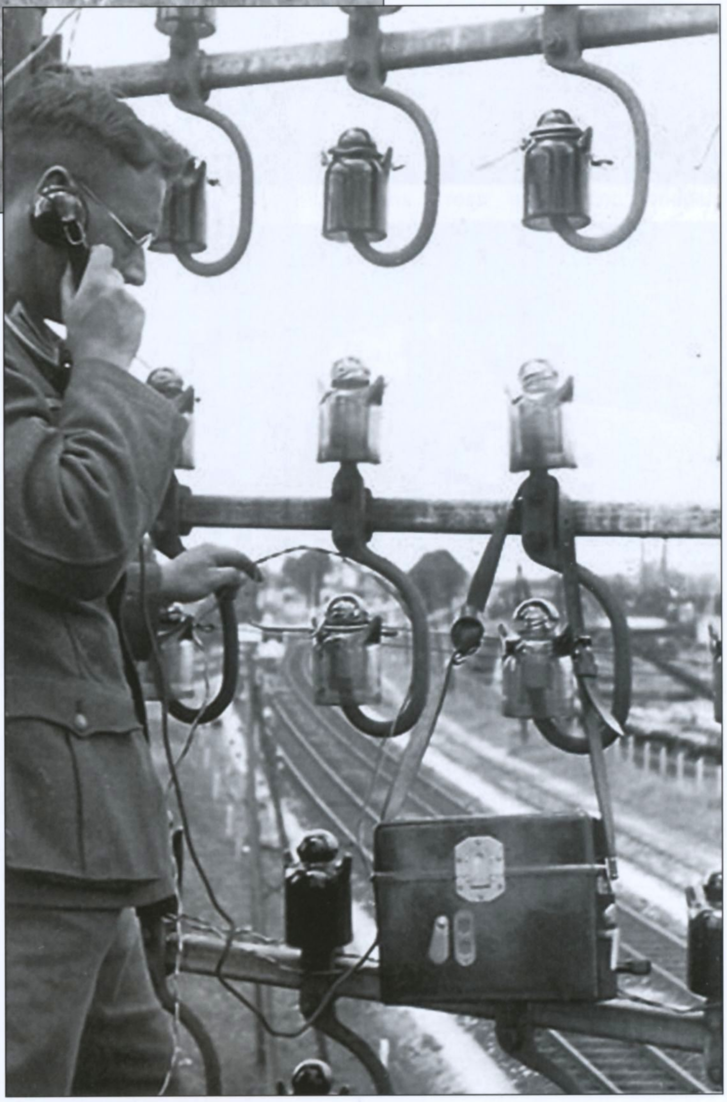


A troop leader armed with a 9mm MP38/40 machine-pistol surveyor the countryside through a pair of 6x30 field binoculars. An M1924 stick grenade can also be seen. The MP38/40 machine pistol was commonly called the "Schmeisser".

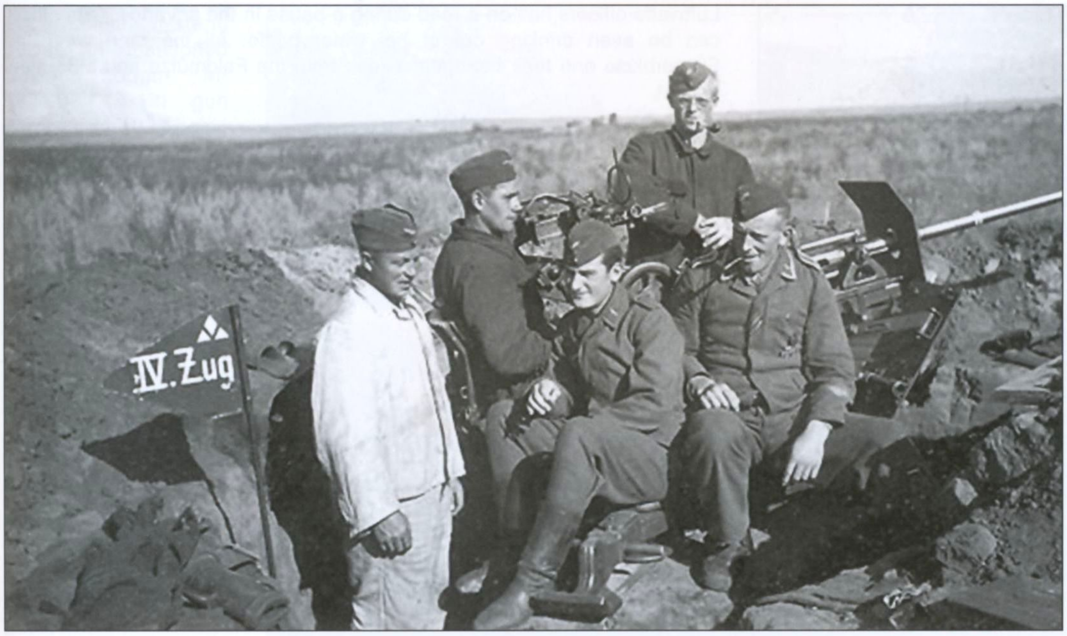


Mortar crews rest in a field with their 8cm s.GrW34 mortar. In each infantry battalion there consisted six of these mortars and they were used extensively against enemy positions with deadly effect. Note how the crews have dug-in their mortars – this was common practice especially when the terrain offered hardly any concealment or shelter from enemy fire.

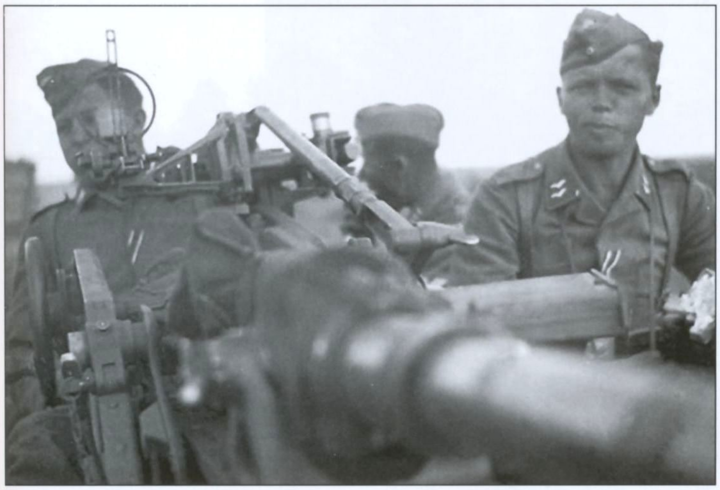
Soldiers rest in a forest clearing outside Smolensk. The main maneuver elements of the infantry regiments were of course to fire and gain as much ground as possible, and hold the position. Normally two regiments would be deployed forward with one in reserve. However, it was not uncommon, especially during the battle of Smolensk, where the frontage coverage was so extensive, that all three regiments were inserted on the front line.



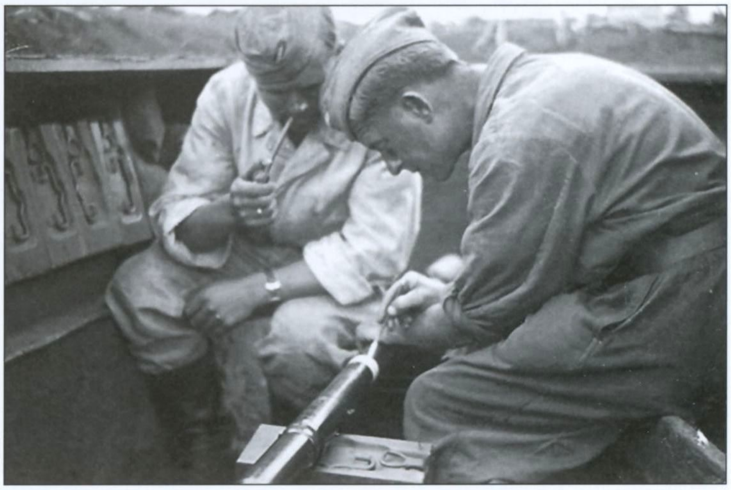
A soldier belonging to a signals battalion. The signals battalion provided both field and radio communications support within the division, linking all subordinate units. Regiments and battalions had their own signals, but for internal communications. Telephone and radio troops were detached to all divisional units and laid wire and cable for telephone connections.



In a dug-in position a Luftwaffe crew can be seen with their 2cm Flak gun. The projectiles used by this weapon were airburst shells. The airburst shells were favored for their anti-personnel capabilities against troops in cover. The explosive force of a 2cm H.E shell was small, about the same as a grenade.

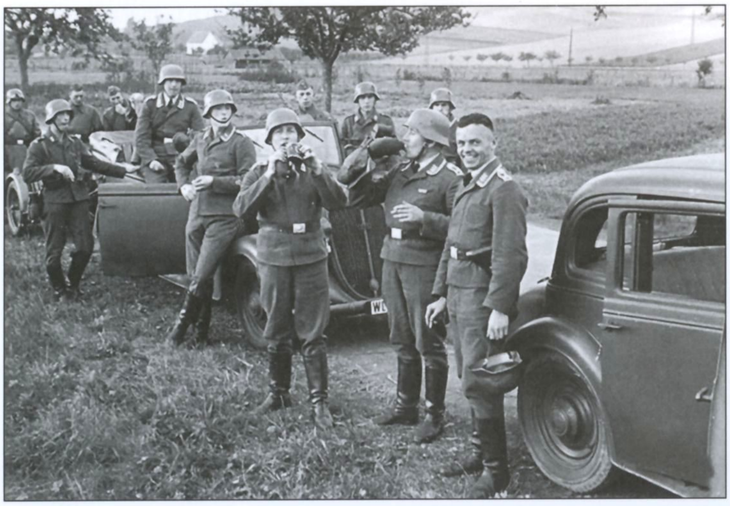


A Luftwaffe 2cm Flak crew during a quite period on the front lines. The number of guns assigned to light flak batteries varied through the war, but was typically twelve 2cm and/or 3.7cm guns in four platoons.

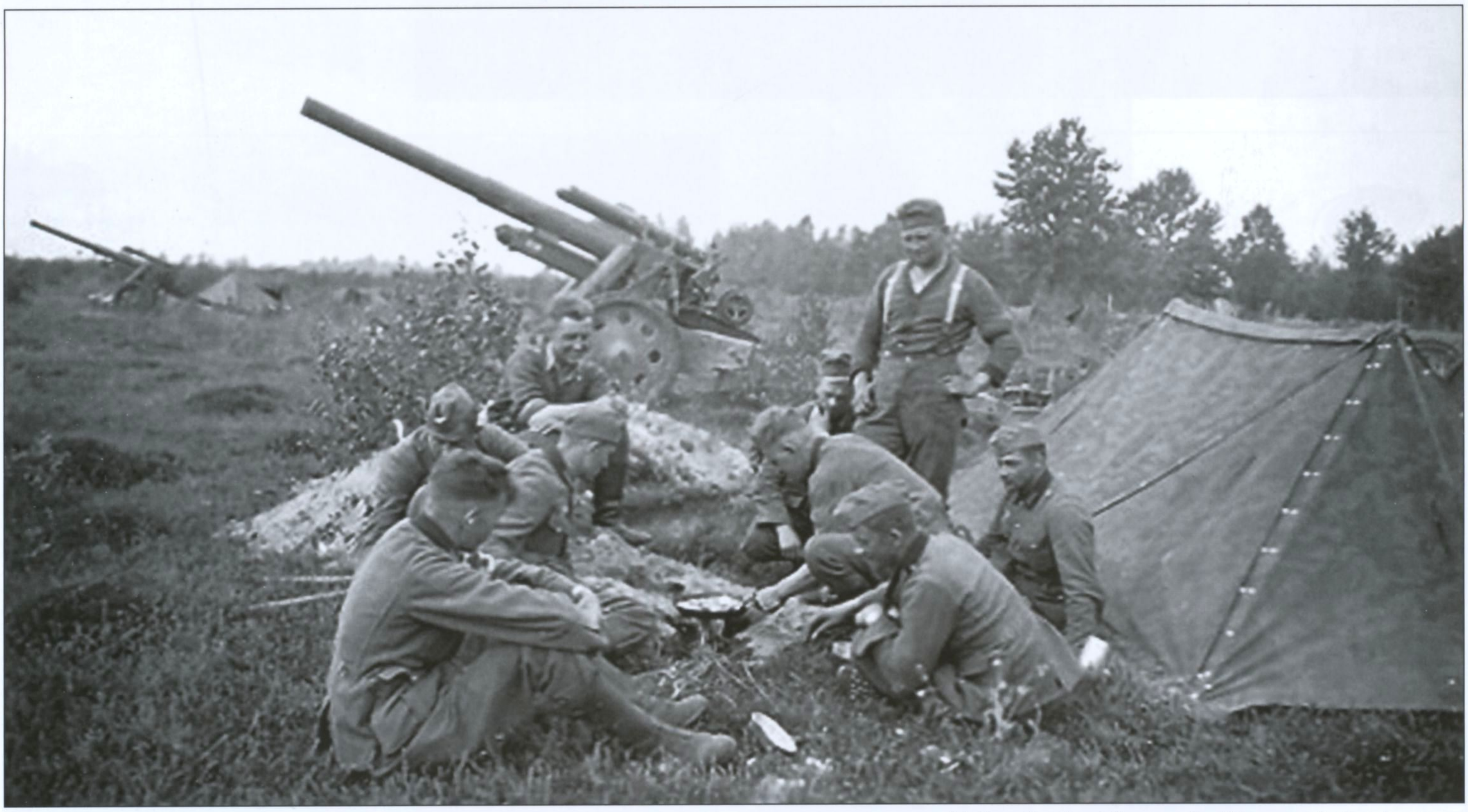


Inside a well dug-in position a Luftwaffe crewman appears to be painting a white 'kill' ring marking on the 2cm barrel of his weapon. This practice was common by crews throughout the war.

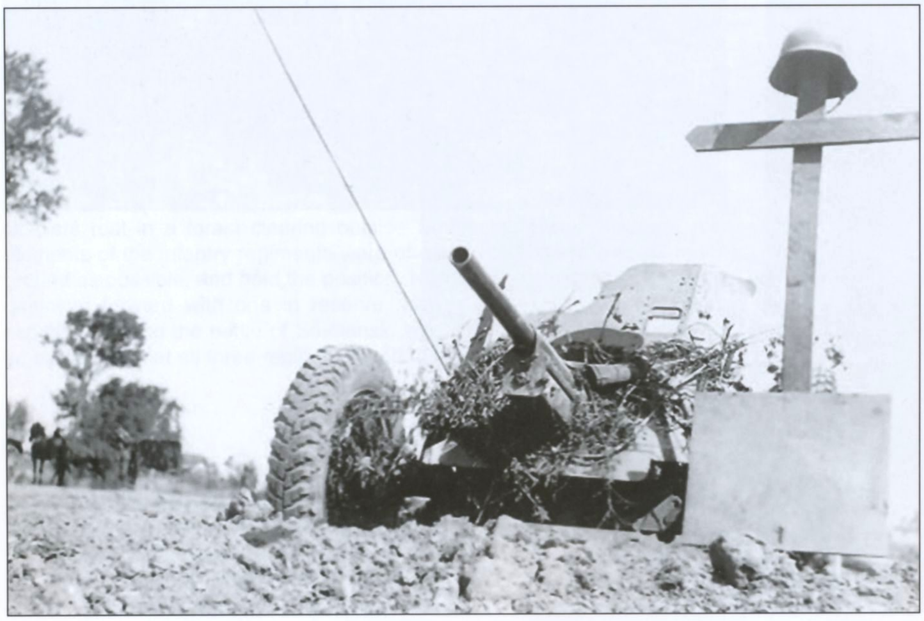
Assault troops inside two pontoon boats wade across a river. These boats were nine-meters in length and because of their size were provided with six paddlers.



Luftwaffe officers halt on a road during a pause in the advance. One officer can be seen drinking out of his water bottle. All the men wear the Fliegerbluse and their headgear varies from the Feldmütze and M35 steel helmet.

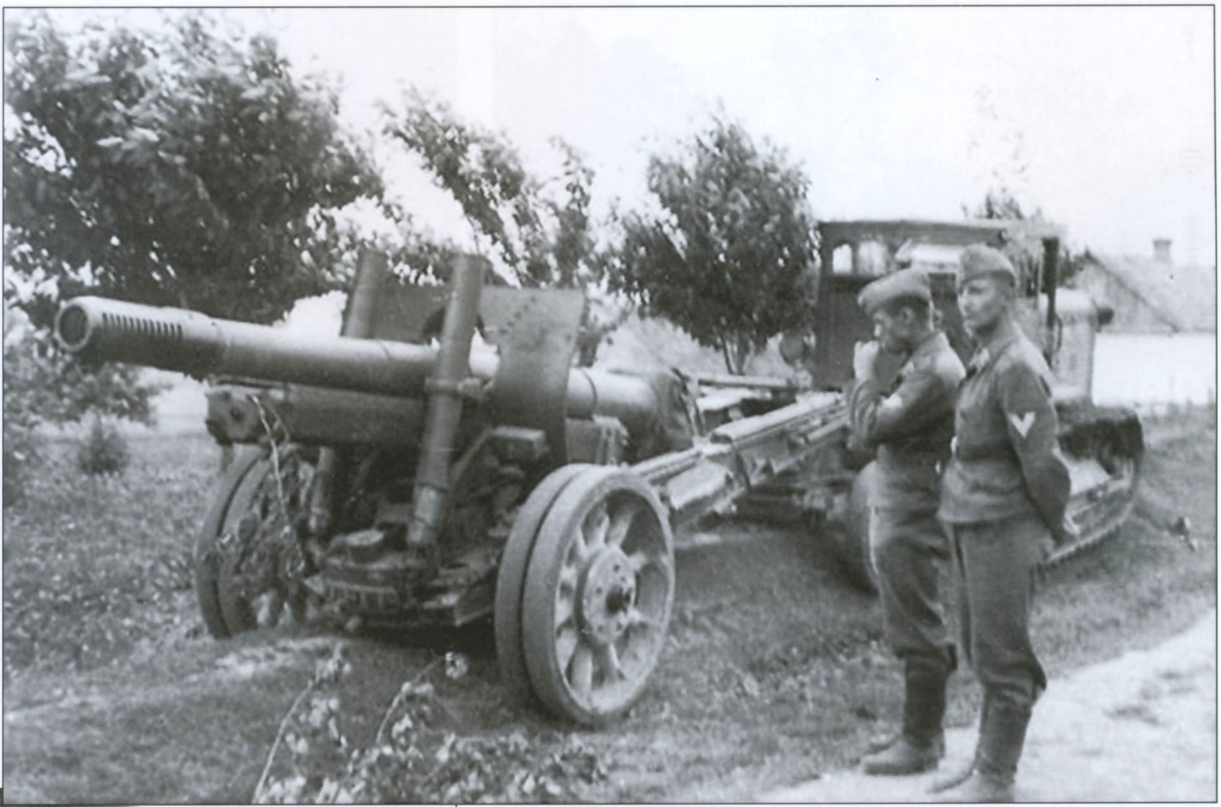


A lull on the front lines and artillerymen belonging to an unidentified 15cm field howitzer battery rest. The 15cm howitzers are seen in their elevated position. This particular gun was primarily designed to attack targets deeper in the enemy's rear. This included command posts, reserve units, assembly areas, and logistics facilities.



A photo of a PaK35/36 positioned next to the grave of an unknown soldier killed in action. The PaK35/36 emerged two years earlier as the first anti-tank weapon to serve both the Wehrmacht and Waffen-SS. However, by the time it saw its debut on the Eastern Front the German gunners soon realized how limited the weapon was in an anti-tank capability.

Two soldiers stand beside an abandoned Soviet 122mm M-1931/37 (A-19) gun howitzer which is being towed by a tractor outside Smolensk. The bulk of Russian artillery was generally towed by horse, but non-divisional heavy artillery units were often by tractor.

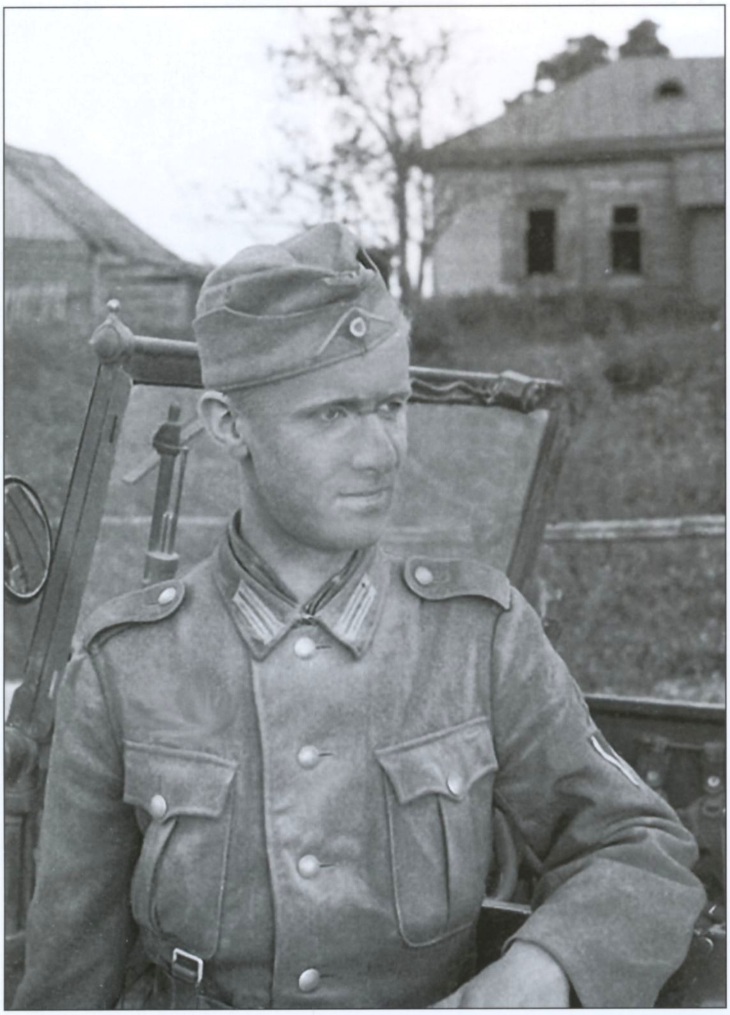


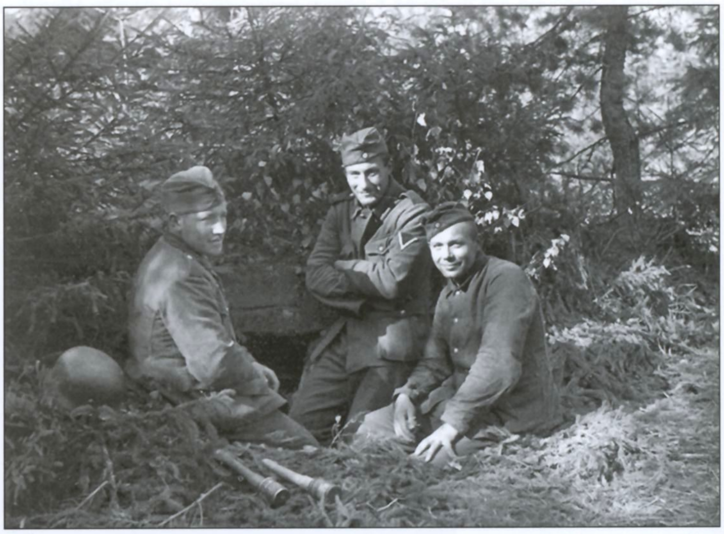
Infantry trucks move forward during intensive action around Smolensk. Note the white painted width markers on both sides of the rear of the vehicle.

Soldiers are seen with a dead cow, more than likely killed during cross-fire. Three of the infantry are identified as motorcyclists wearing rubberized motorcycle coats. None are armed or wearing any personal kit, which suggests that the area has already been occupied.

A camouflaged 10.5cm le.FH18 in a harvested field near Smolensk in July 1941. A gun crew stand around preparing their position for action. Ammunition handlers can be seen standing with stacked ammunition and propellant charges used before loading the gun.

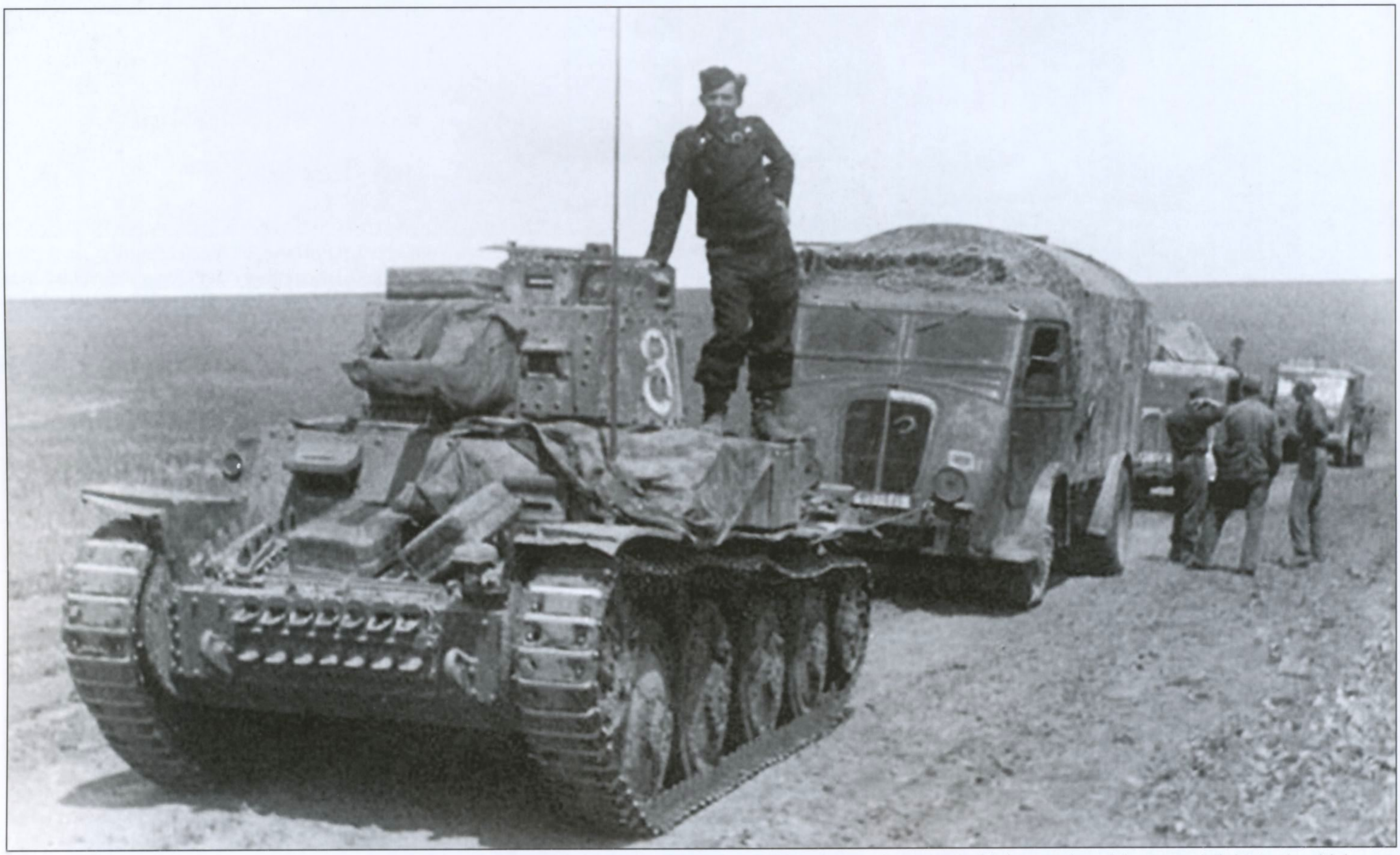
Officers observe the developing battle around Smolensk. Although commanders were astonished by the amount of Russian prisoners taken during the battle, the German supply system was overwhelmed and ration stocks were consequently unable to provide the Red Army prisoners with much food or care.



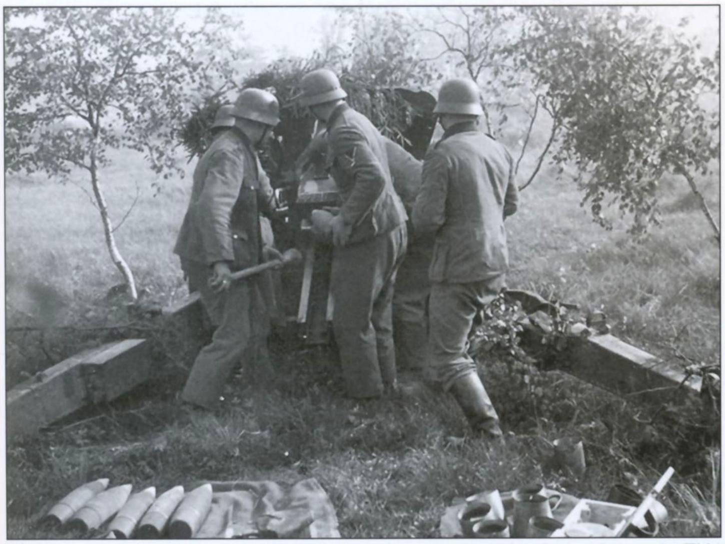


Three soldiers sit in a slit trench which is well concealed by surrounding vegetation. Three M1924 stick grenades can be seen on the edge of the trench. The soldier on the right holds the rank of an Obergefreiter as indicated by his rank chevrons on his left arm.

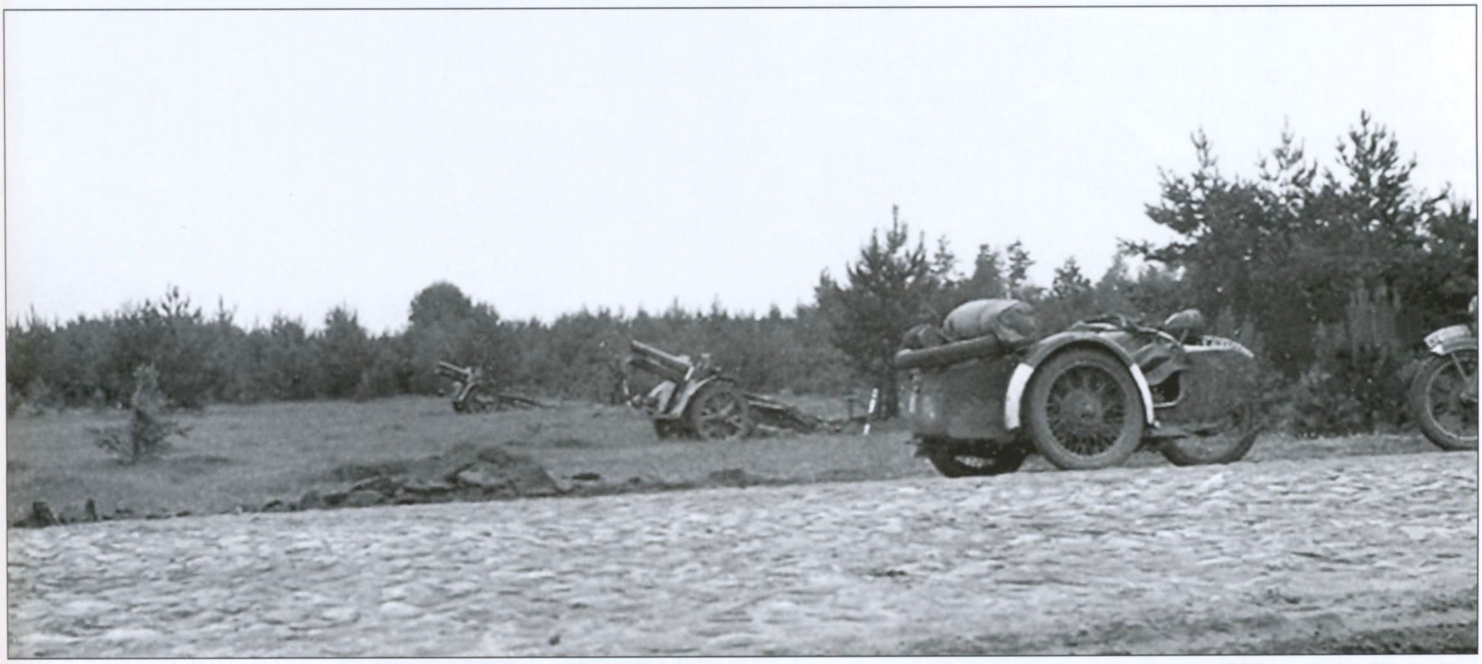
A dusty soldier stands next to his vehicle. The roads during the summer months were incredibly dusty and many troops literally become caked in thick dust. Many took to wearing goggles in order to avoid dust particles getting into their eyes. It is evident from this photo that this soldier has been wearing goggles.



A Pz.Kpfw.38 (t) halted on a road with a column of other vehicles. The Pz.Kpfw.38 (t) became the most widely used and important light tank which was incorporated by the Panzertruppe during the early years of the war.

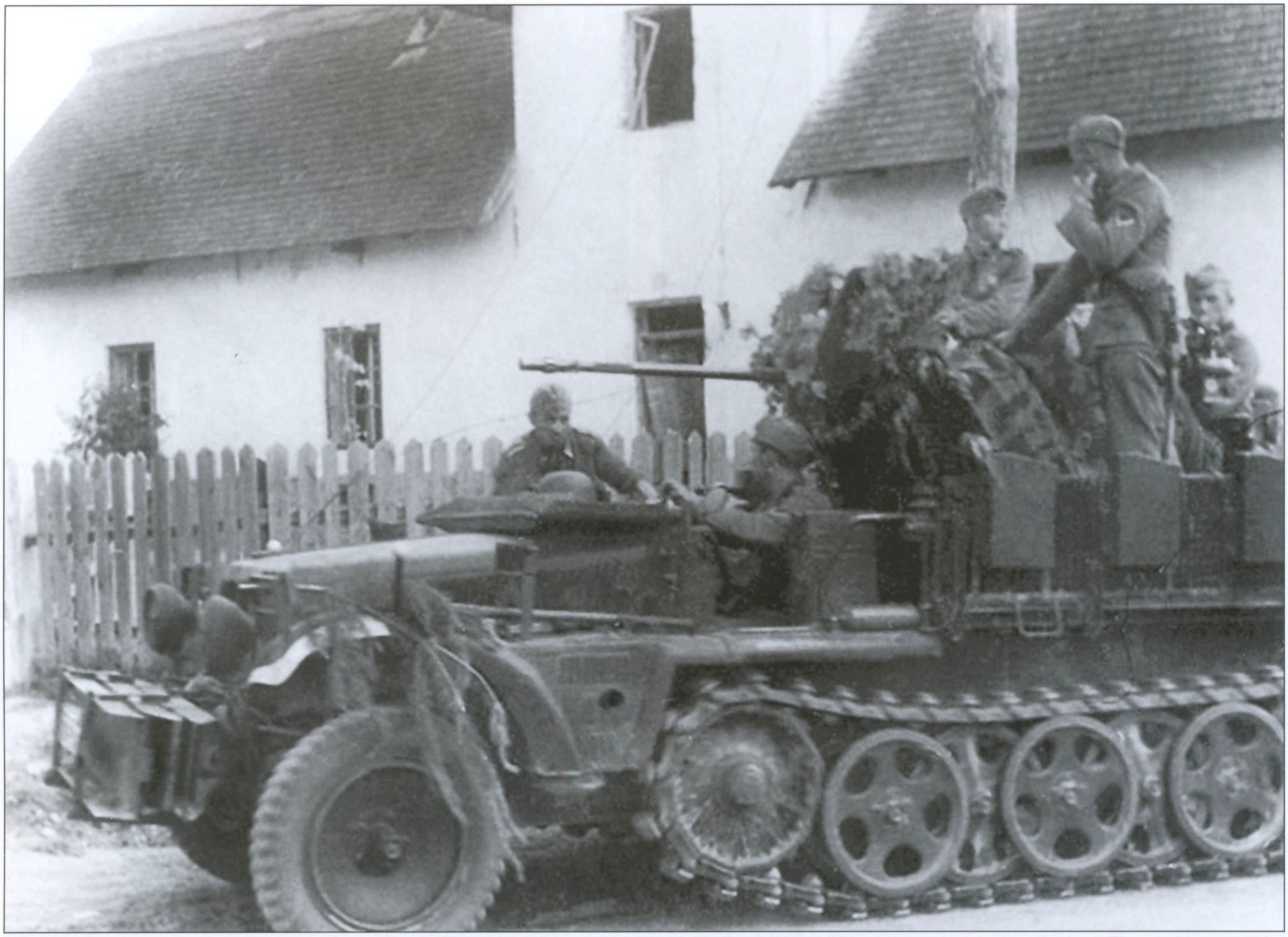


Two photographs showing an artillery crew in action with their 10.5cm le.FH18 artillery gun. The first photo shows the crew preparing to load the gun for firing. A number of propellant charges and 10.5cm ammunition charges can be seen laid out. The second photo shows the gun being fired against an enemy target. The rate of fire was four-to-six rounds per minute.

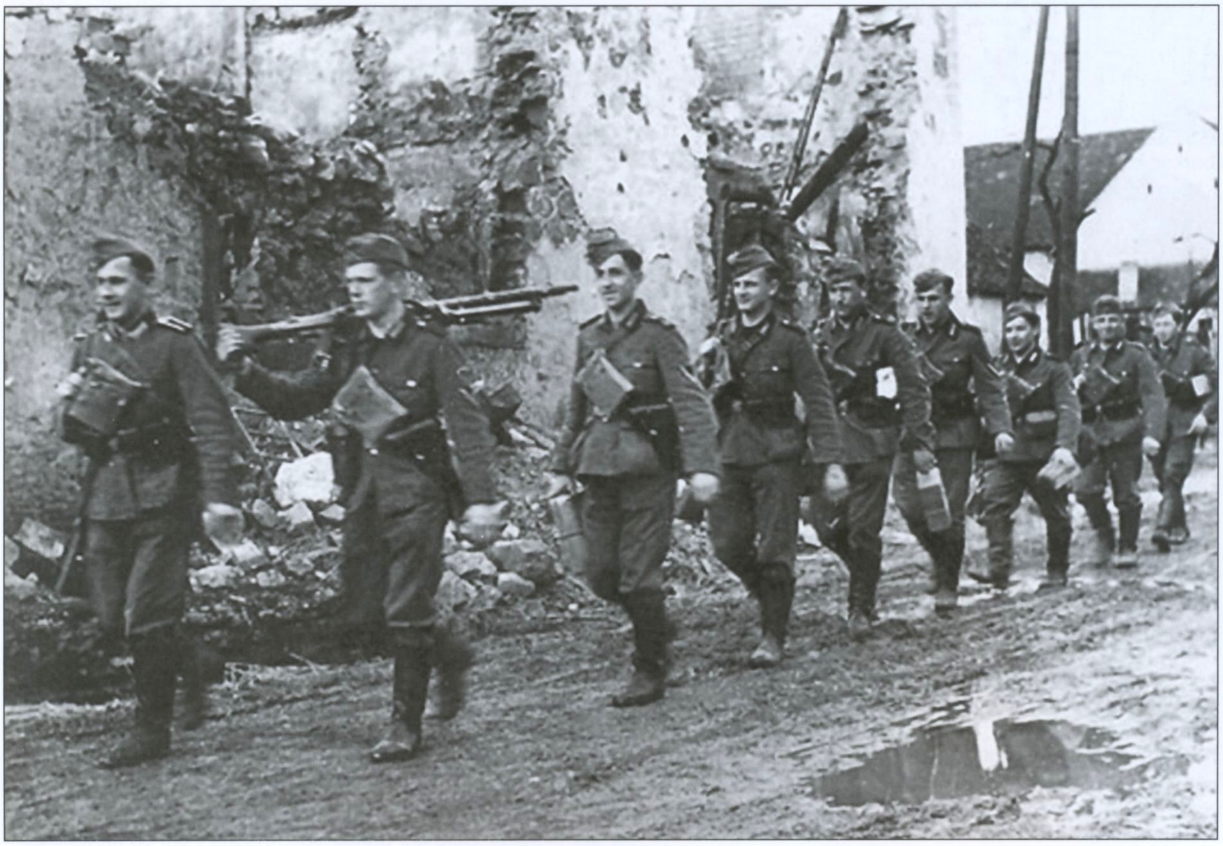


A motorcycle combination is parked on a road. Out in the field behind the motorcycle is a standard infantry gun company of two s.IG33 howitzers. There does not seem to be much activity suggesting that there is no immediate danger from the enemy.

Two photographs showing Soviet prisoners being led away following the capture of the city of Smolensk. Although Nazi propaganda portrayed the Russian soldier and his nation as sub-human, the average German soldier during the early days of Barbarossa treated their enemy relatively well. However, generally German infantry were instilled to hate their enemy, and on the battlefield smashed through the Soviets lines attempting to kill as many as possible without taking prisoners.

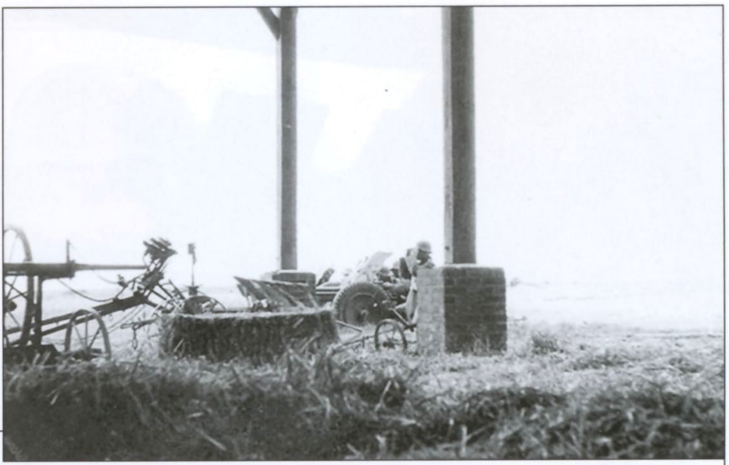


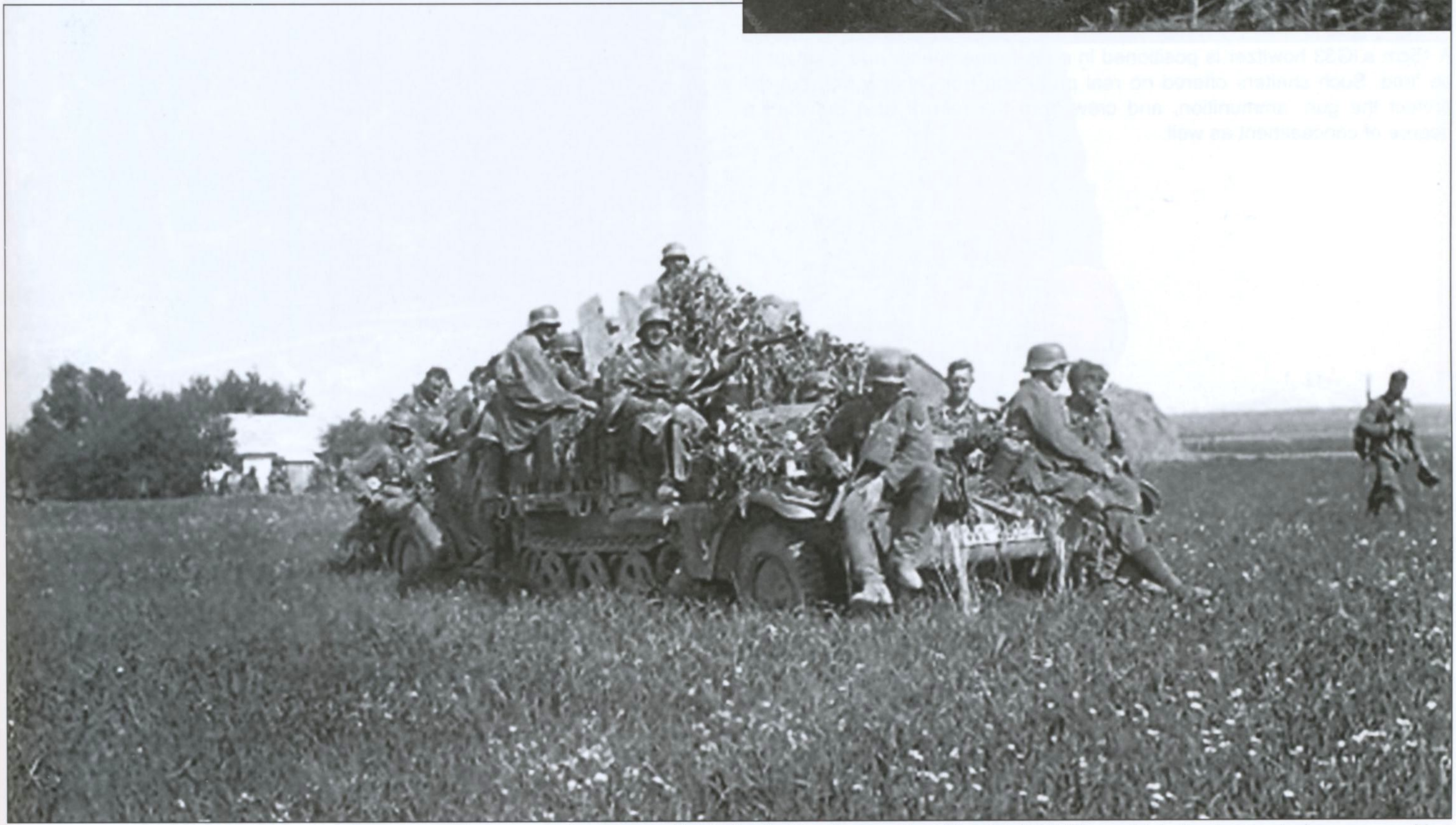
A 2cm Flak gun mounted on the back of a halftrack. The sides of the vehicle are folded up with additional magazine cases attached. These sides could be folded down to allow extra space on board the halftrack for the crew. The flak gun's splinter shield has been camouflaged with saplings.



A file of troops passes through a town evidently severely damaged by sustained ground and aerial bombing. A soldier can be seen armed with an MG34, which is resting on his shoulder for ease of carriage. Note all the infantry are wearing gas capes.

A PaK35/36 gun crew positioned on a farmstead with their PaK gun. A typical infantry regiment controlled three infantry battalions, an infantry gun company with six 7.5cm le.IG18 and two 15cm s.IG33 guns, and an anti-tank company with twelve 3.7cm PaK35/36 guns.

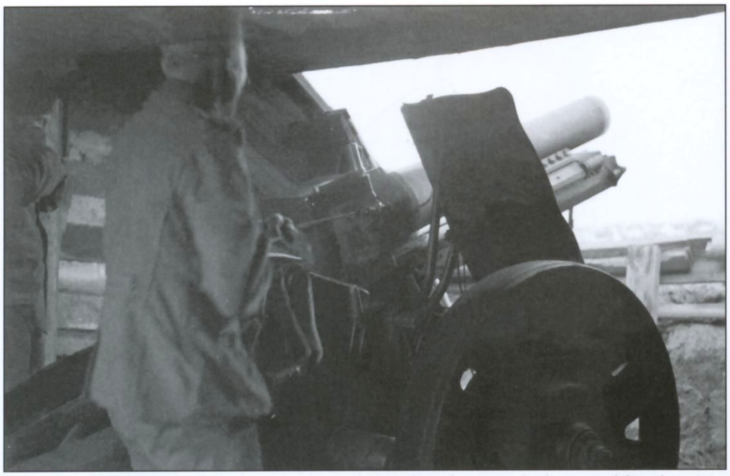




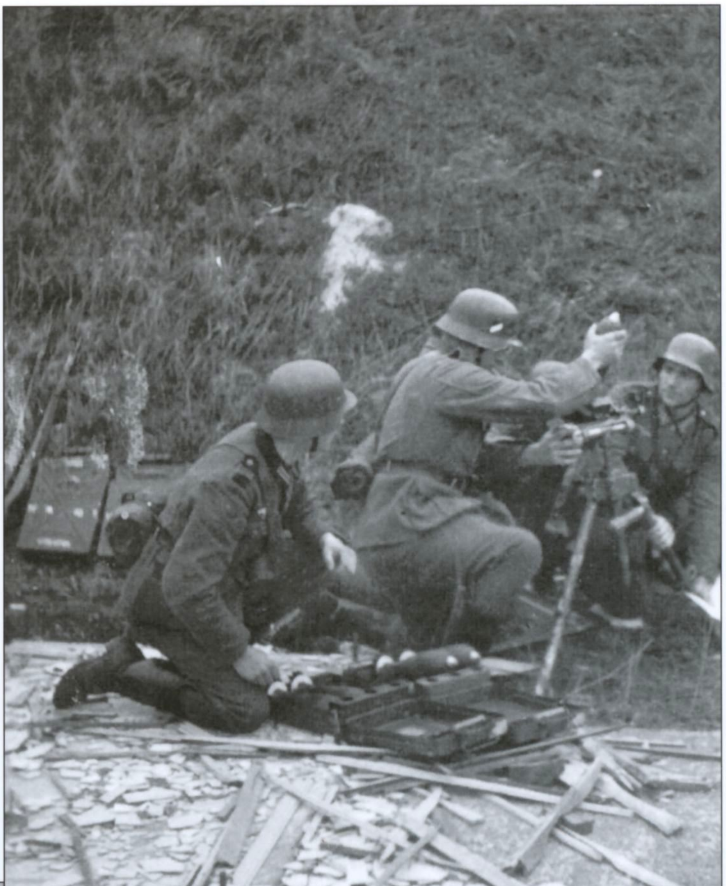
A well camouflaged Sd.Kfz.10 makes its way slowly across a large open field. The halftrack mounts a 2cm FlaK30. The vehicle is also towing an ammunition trailer. A number of infantrymen too have decided to hitch a lift.

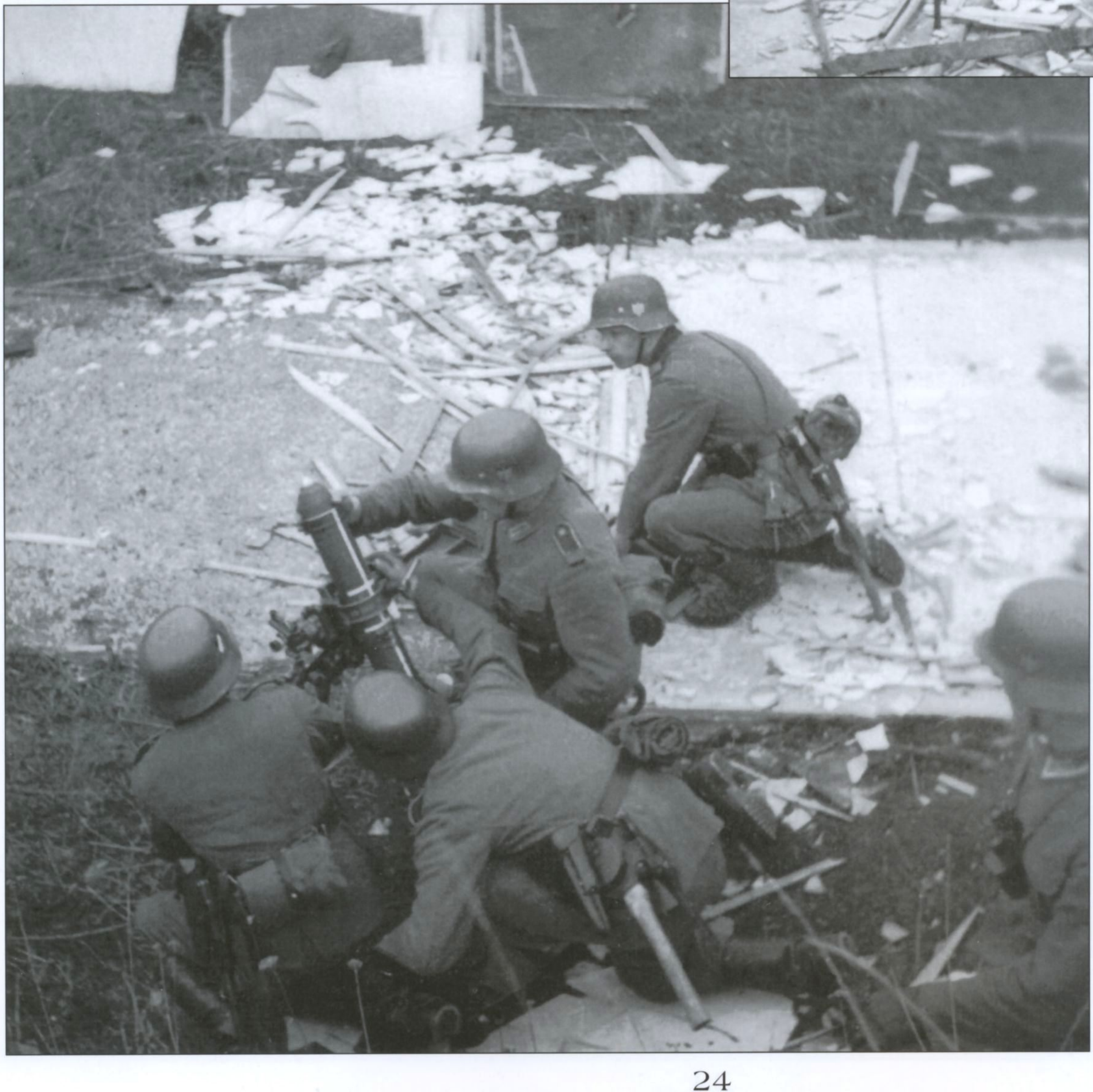
A Panzer crew smiles for the camera whilst sitting on board a very well camouflaged Pz.Kpfw.III command tank. Each Panzer-Division was fully equipped when it invaded Russia. Each division fielded two motorized infantry regiments with two infantry battalions.

The crew of a StuG.III assault gun with their vehicle during a lull in operations in the area around Smolensk. During Barbarossa the StuG.III was detailed to the infantry divisions that fought at focal points in the battle. The StuG.III performed extremely well in an infantry support roll. But as the war progressed and Soviet armor began introducing heavier armor, the hard pressed StuG.III was constantly called upon by the infantry for offensive and defensive fire support.



A 15cm s.IG33 howitzer is positioned in a log-frame shelter and is about to be fired. Such shelters offered no real protection from enemy fire, but did protect the gun, ammunition, and crew from the rain. It also provided a degree of concealment as well.



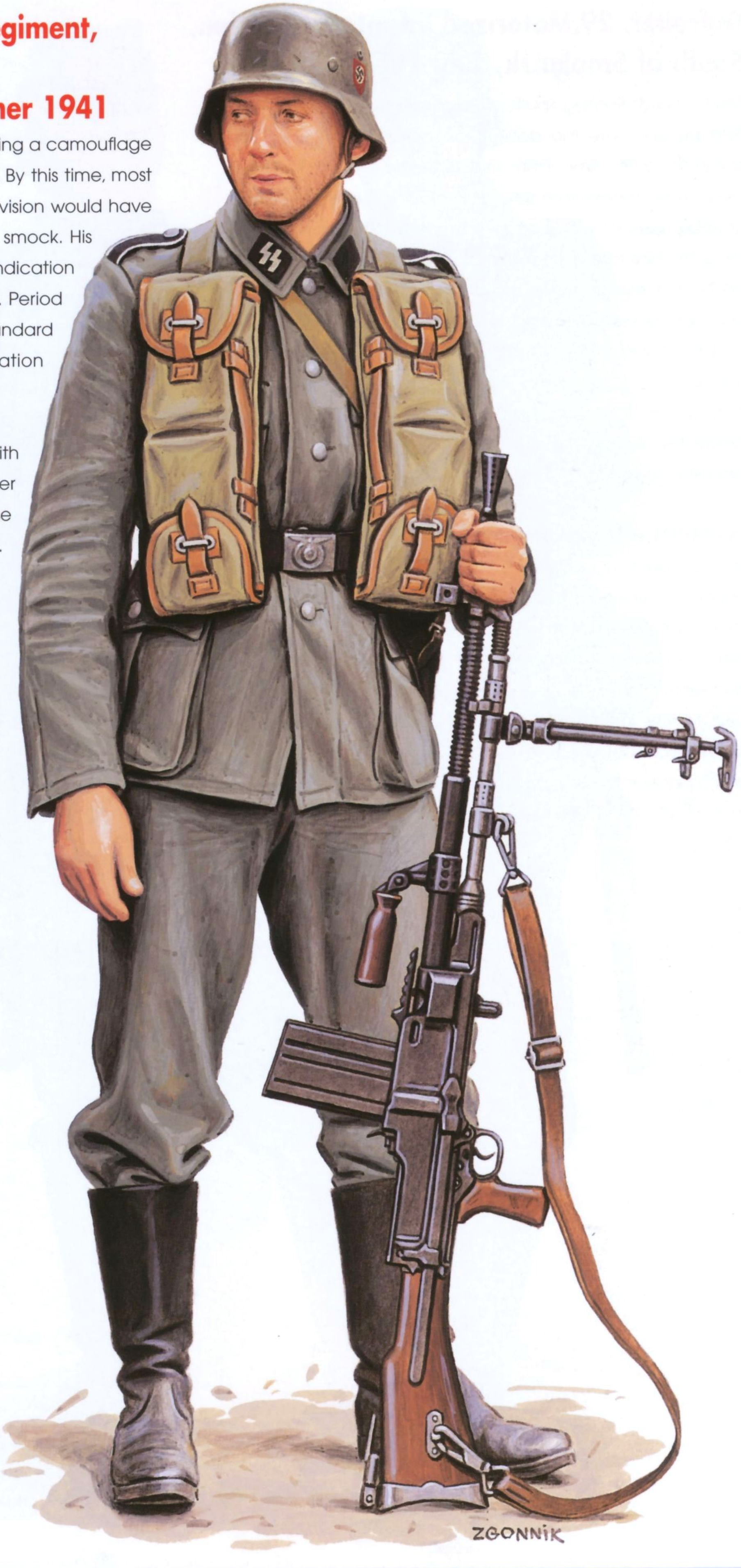


Two photographs taken moments apart showing the 8cm s.GrW34 mortar in action against an enemy target. Each battalion fielded six of these excellent 8cm s.GrW34 mortars, which could fire 15 bombs per minute to a range of 2,625 yards. Aside from high-explosive and smoke bombs, this weapon also fired a "bounding" bomb.

SS-Mann, 'Deutschland' Regiment, SS-Das Reich Division, Heeresgruppe Mitte, Summer 1941

It is notable that this SS-Mann is not wearing a camouflage smock over his M1940 field gray uniform. By this time, most front-line combat troops of Das Reich Division would have been issued both a helmet cover and smock. His MG30 (Czech 7.92mm ZB30) is further indication that this soldier is not on front line duty. Period photos show that the MG34 was the standard light machine gun during Operation Barbarossa.

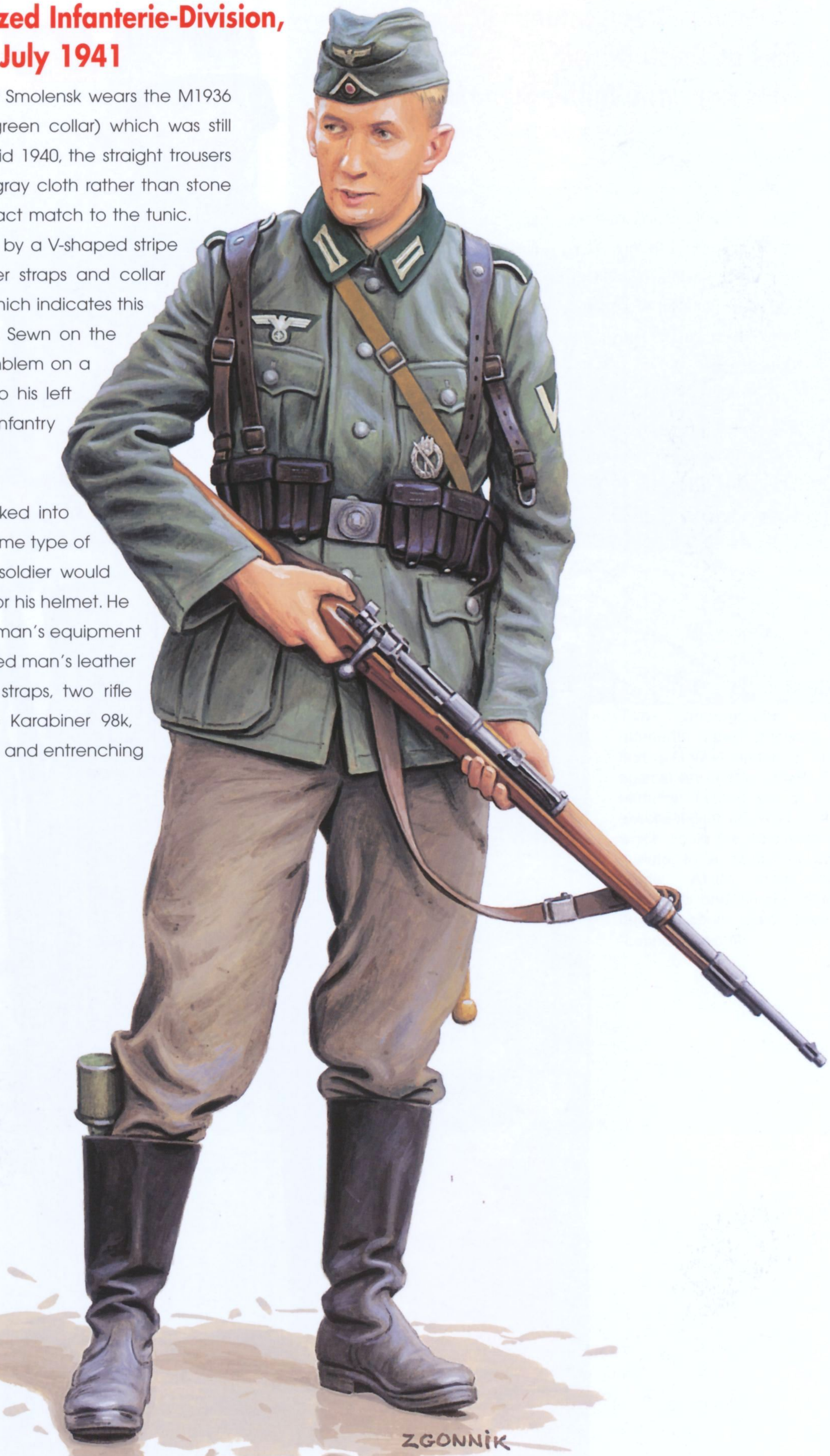
The equipment worn includes the belt with holster for a P08 Luger and the bandolier magazine pouches for the MG13 (these easily held the magazines for the MG30).



Gefreiter, 29.Motorized Infanterie-Division, South of Smolensk, July 1941

This Gefreiter fighting south of Smolensk wears the M1936 field blouse (note the dark green collar) which was still common at this time. From mid 1940, the straight trousers were to be made from field gray cloth rather than stone gray, but seldom was it an exact match to the tunic. His Gefreiter's rank is denoted by a V-shaped stripe on his left sleeve. His shoulder straps and collar patches have white piping, which indicates this soldier belong to the infantry. Sewn on the right breast is the national emblem on a dark green base. Attached to his left breast he displays the silver Infantry Assault badge.

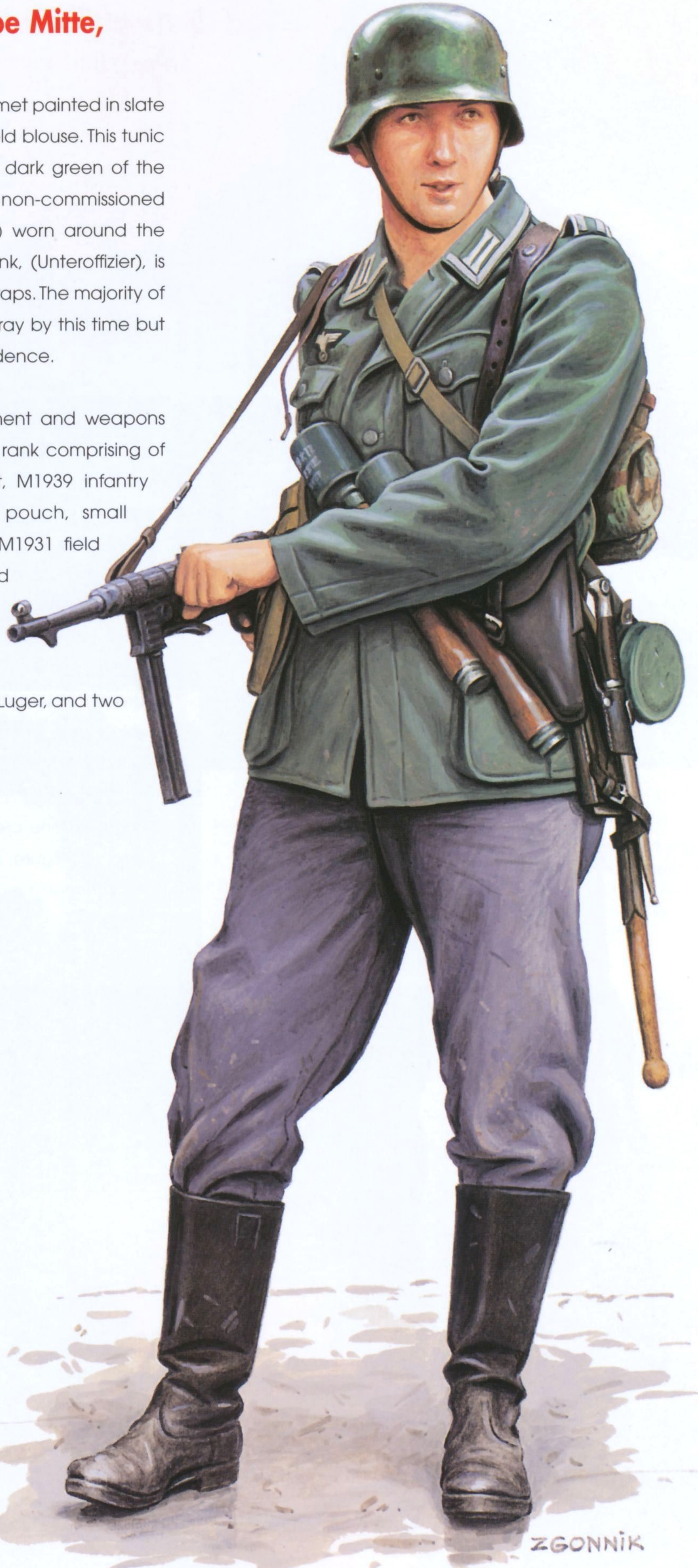
The M1924 stick grenade tucked into the right boot suggests that some type of action is imminent. If so, this soldier would soon trade his M34 field cap for his helmet. He has been issued the usual rifleman's equipment and weapons; the army enlisted man's leather belt, M1939 infantry support straps, two rifle ammunition pouches for the Karabiner 98k, gasmask (which is out of view) and entrenching tool, which can just be seen.

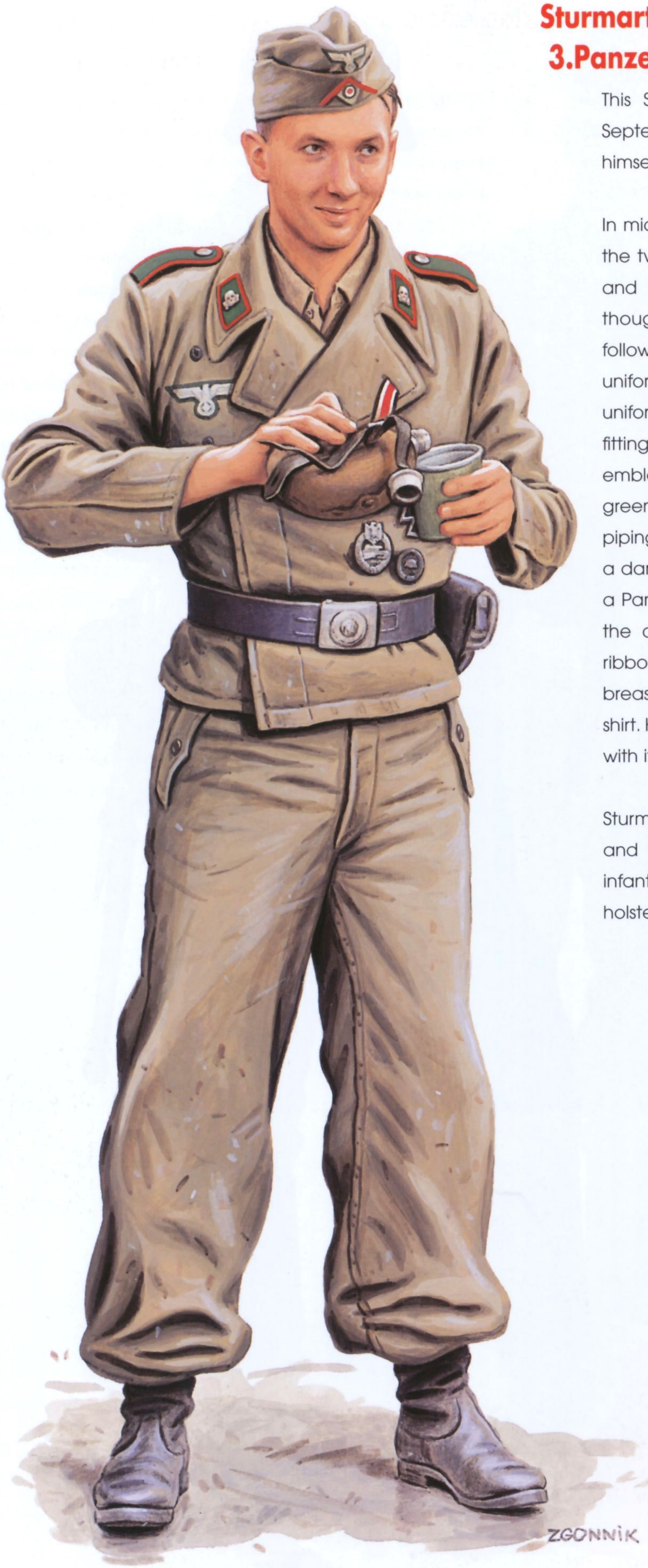


Unteroffizier, Heeresgruppe Mitte, July 1941

This Unteroffizier wears the M35 steel helmet painted in slate grey finish. He wears the M1940 wool field blouse. This tunic has a field grey collar rather than the dark green of the earlier M1936 tunic. His status as a non-commissioned officer is indicated by the brais (tress) worn around the edge of the collar while his exact rank, (Unteroffizier), is provided by the braid on his shoulder straps. The majority of service trousers may have been field gray by this time but the original stone gray remained in evidence.

He has been issued the usual equipment and weapons with that associated to a soldier of his rank comprising of the army enlisted man's leather belt, M1939 infantry support straps, MP38/40 magazine pouch, small entrenching tool, M1931 bread bag, M1931 field flask or drinking cup, M31 mess kit and (Zeltbahn) shelter quarter and gas mask in its M1938 metal canister. His weapons compose of the 9mm MP40 with its distinctive 'ribbed' receiver, P08 Luger, and two M1924 stick grenades.



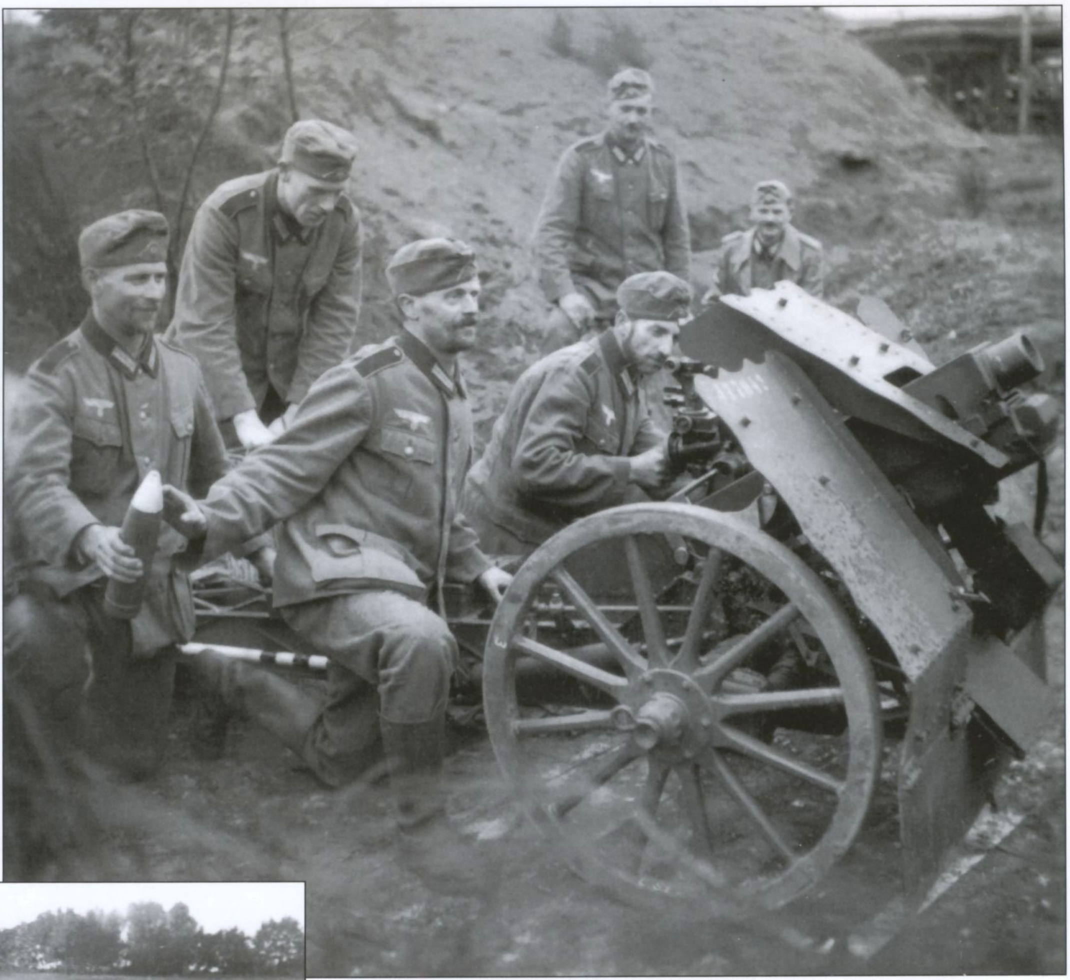


Sturmartillerie Crewman, 39.Panzer-Korps, 3.Panzer-Armee, Roslavl, September 1941

This Sturmartillerie crewman operating near Roslavl in September 1941 has paused in his advance to refresh himself with water from his M1931 field flask.

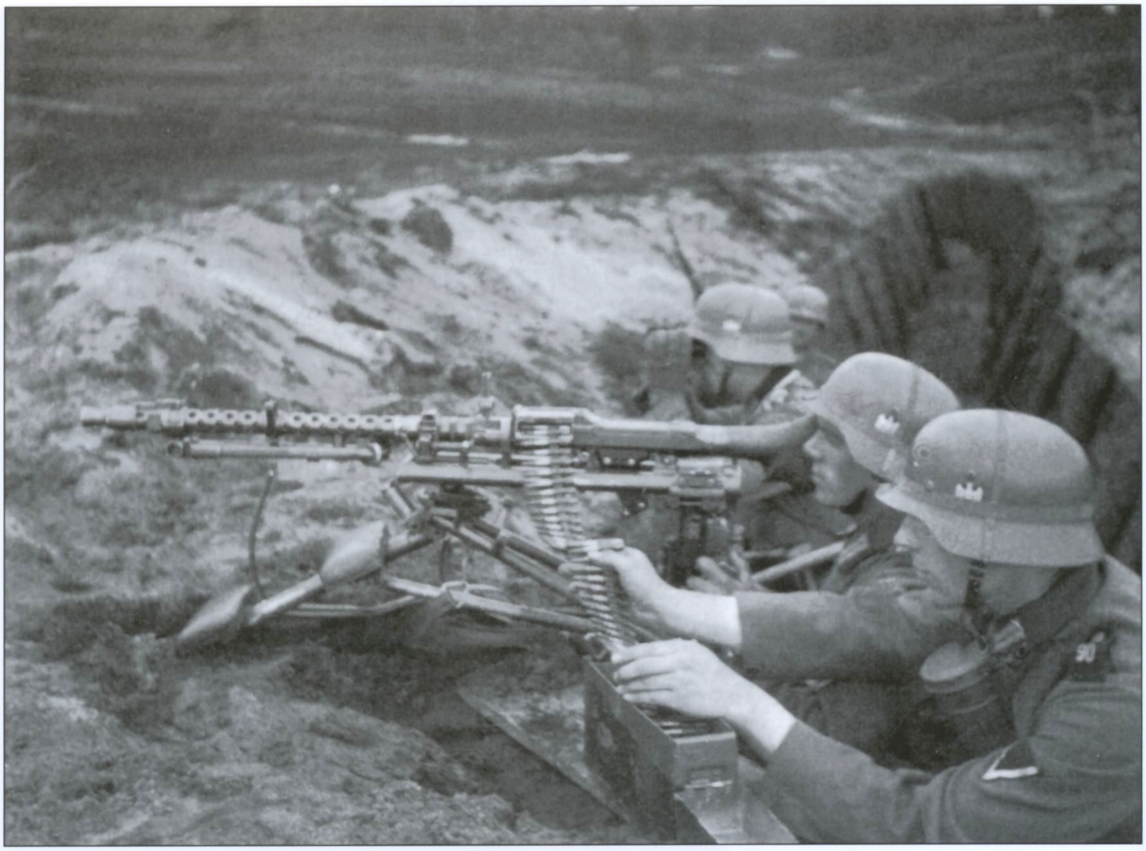
In mid-1941 AFV crews started to be issued with copies of the two-piece Panzer uniform in hard wearing cotton drill and herringbone twill materials. Colors varied but it is thought that the first types issued were mouse gray followed by shades of field gray and reed green. This uniform served both working dress and a summer field uniform. This light grey jacket was hard wearing and loose fitting. Its collar patches consisted of the death's head emblems, which were stitched on patches of dark blue-green cloth and were edged with bright red Waffenfarbe piping. Sewn on the right breast is the national emblem on a dark green base. Attached to his left breast he displays a Panzer Assault badge and Wound badge. Attached to the designated buttonhole is the 2nd Class Iron Cross ribbon. He also has a 1st Class Iron Cross attached to his left breast. Underneath the jacket he wears a light grey panzer shirt. Headgear worn is the highly popular M1938 field cap with its red soutache.

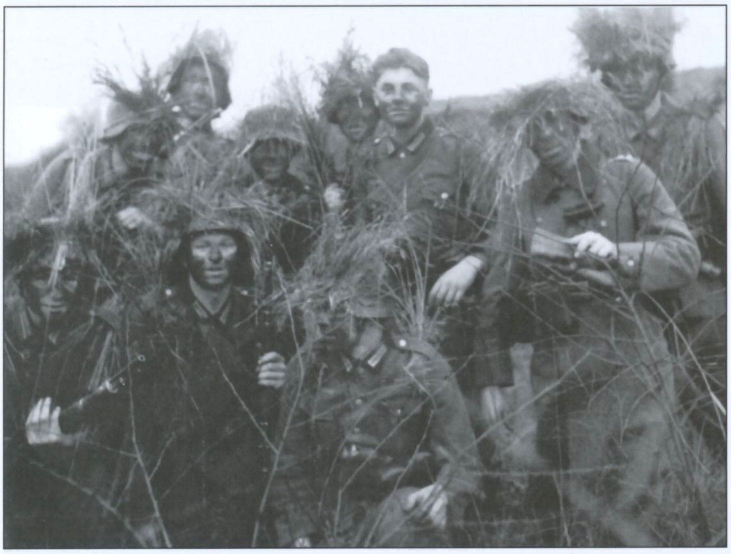
Sturmartillerie crewmen wore the minimum of equipment and the figure reflects this. He wears the black leather infantryman's leather belt with a P38 pistol in its 'hardshell' holster.



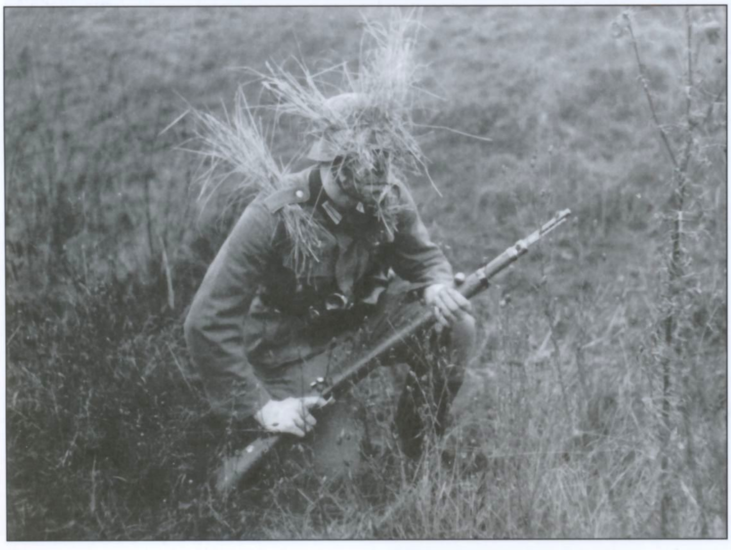
Three different photographs in three different roles of engagement showing the 7.5cm l.IG18 in action. Each infantry regiment possessed its own artillery in the form of 7.5cm l.IG18 and 15cm s.IG33 infantry guns, which were regarded the workhorse pieces operated by specially trained infantrymen. Each infantry gun company had six 7.5cm l.IG18's.

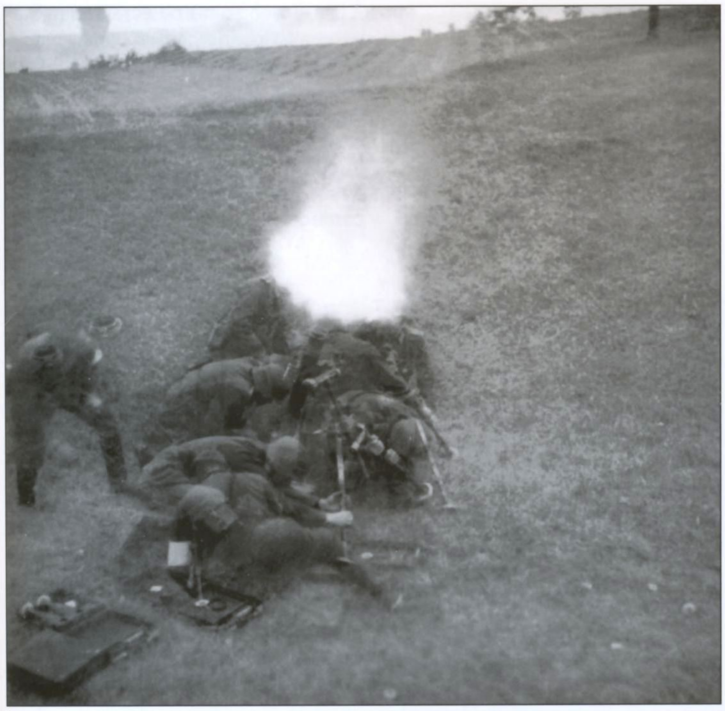
In this photograph, an MG34 is about to be fired from its tripod mount from what appears to be a captured Russian defensive position. Rifle groups generally had a light machine-gun with a bipod, along with one or two spare barrels. A heavy machine-gun group, however, had the bipod fitted machine gun, but additionally carried a tripod with optical sight.



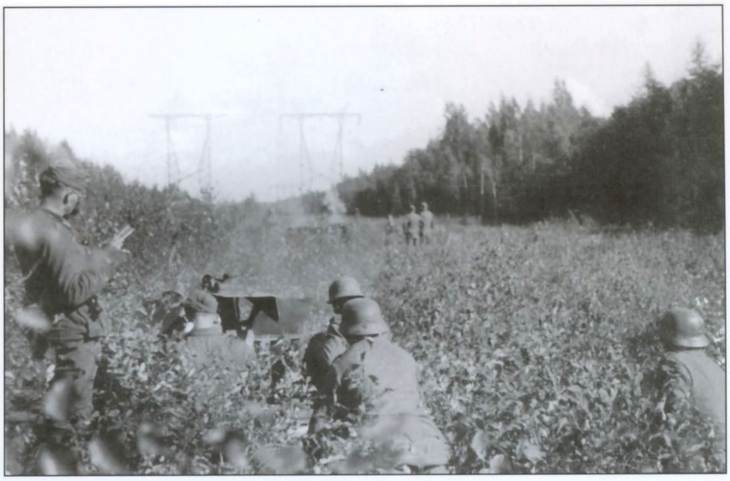


Three photographs revealing the effectiveness of camouflage on rifleman whilst on the battlefield. All the soldiers have straw held in place in their shoulder straps and on the M35 steel helmet. Foliage was often held in place on the steel helmet by the use of rubber rings. Although not ideally suited for urbanized warfare, the use of camouflaged helmets was especially effective in dense undergrowth including long grass, hedgerows and forests.

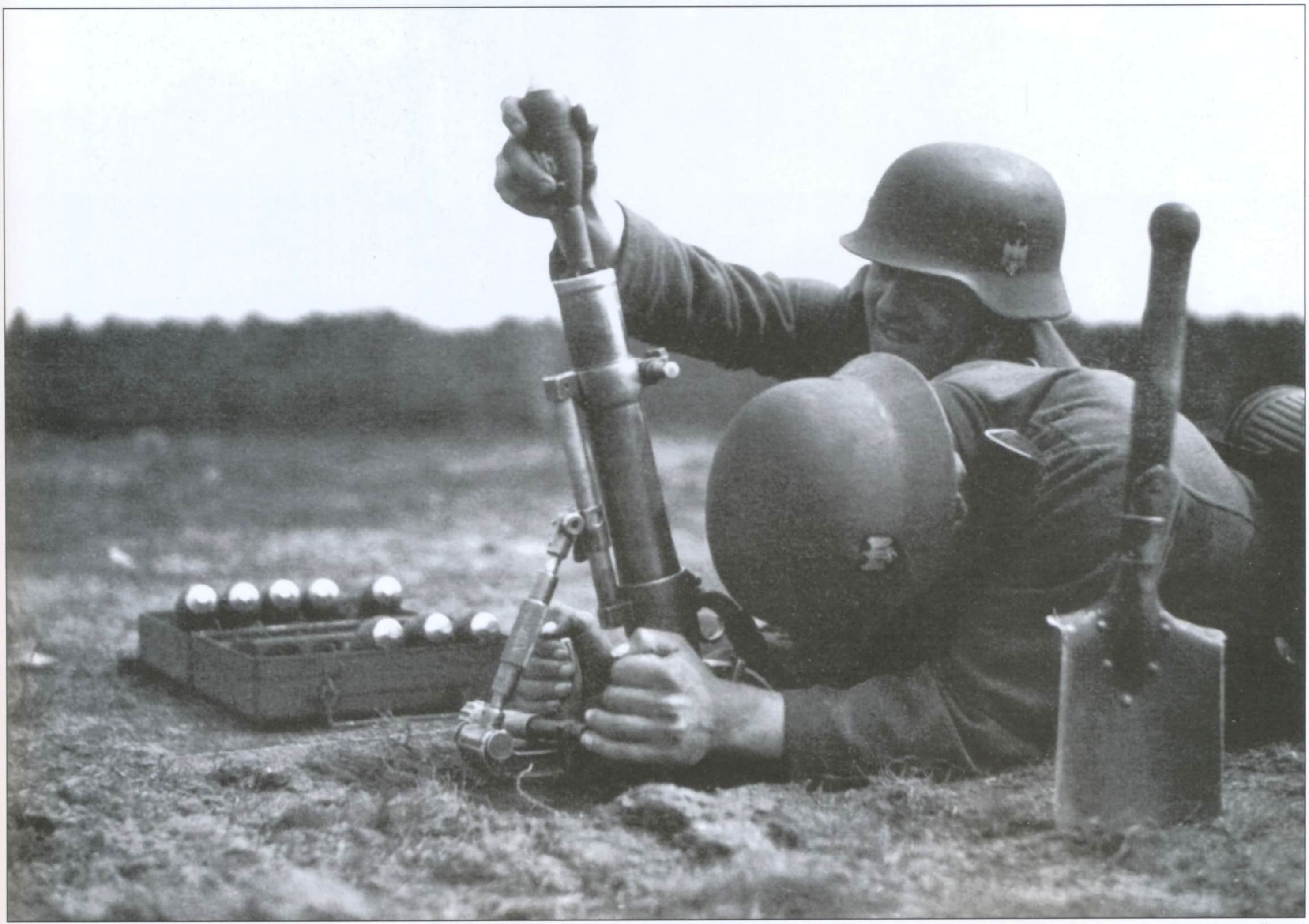




A photo taken the moment an 8cm s.GrW34 mortar is fired in anger against an enemy target. Note how all the crew duck for cover to avoid the back blast as the projectile leaves the gun tube. Two of the ammunition handlers or loaders can be seen holding the tripod in order to keep it steady and accurate when firing.



The crew of what appears to be a 7.5cm l.IG18 has concealed their weapon in some undergrowth. Although the gun was one of the first post World War One weapons to be issued to the Wehrmacht, it remained in service on the Eastern Front until the end of the war.



A projectile is being placed inside the 5cm barrel of the l.GrW36 mortar. An entrenching tool has obviously been used to place the mortar into the soil and make it level for firing. The l.GrW36 intended role was to engage pockets of resistance that were beyond the range of hand grenades. It was designed for high angled fire only (no less than 42°). The main drawbacks of the weapon were its inadequate range and the limited effectiveness of its ammunition, which were regarded as not heavy enough.

A file of troops march across a railway line following the successful encirclement of Soviet troops in the Smolensk Pocket. An MG34 is being carried by one infantryman. The weapon weighed 25.4 pounds and troops were often seen carrying them over their shoulder for ease of carriage.

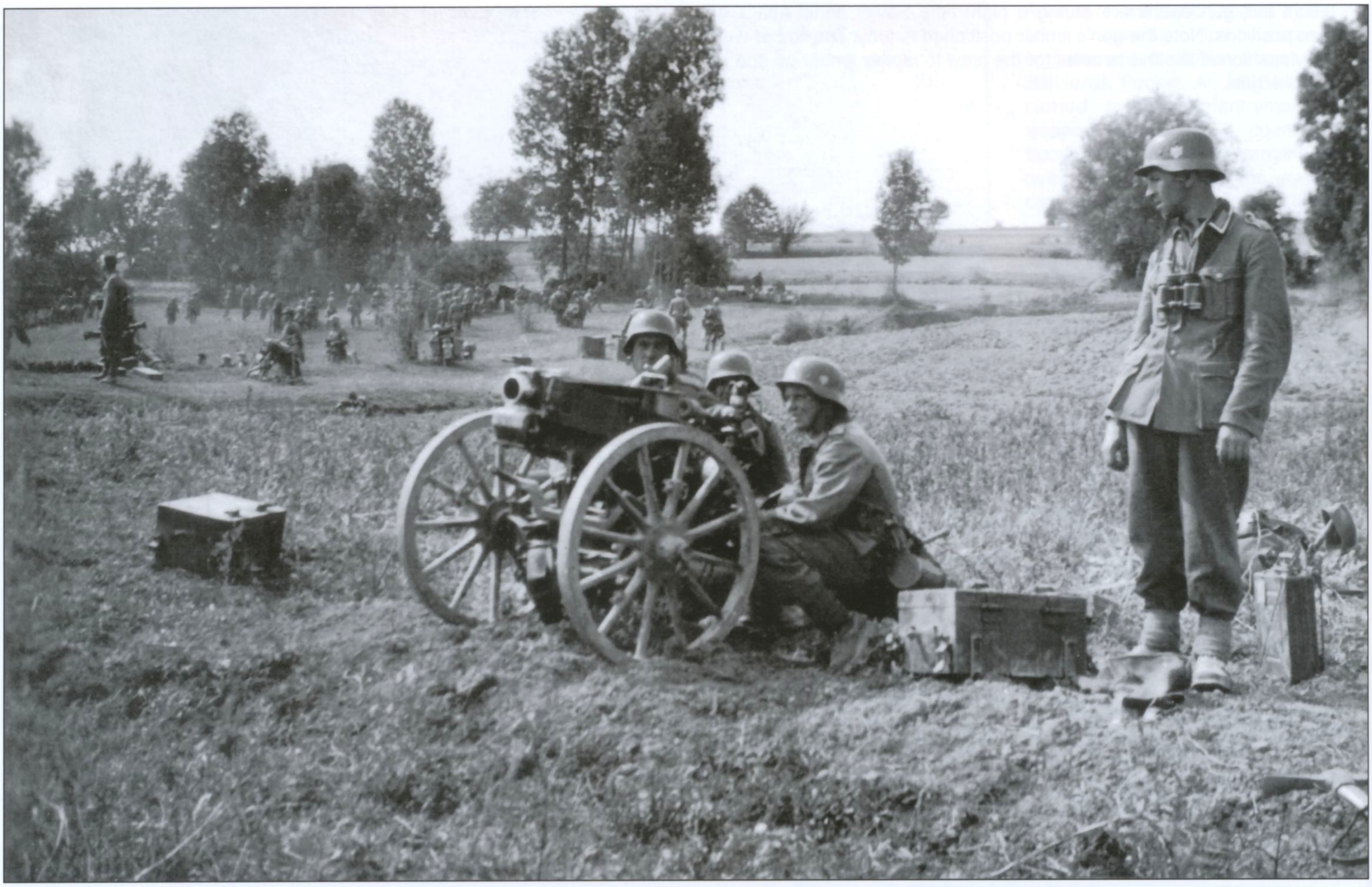
Three infantrymen sit beside what is more than likely a captured Soviet shelter during operations east of Smolensk in late July 1941. The Germans built very similar shelters too, which were called Halbgruppenunterstände (group and half-group living bunkers). These were to become essential for the Landser if they were to survive the ceaseless artillery and later the terrible freezing weather conditions.

An impressive photograph showing a column of StuG.III assault guns on the way to the front with infantry hitching a lift. In those first triumphant weeks of the invasion of the Soviet Union, the assault guns performed well in an infantry support role.

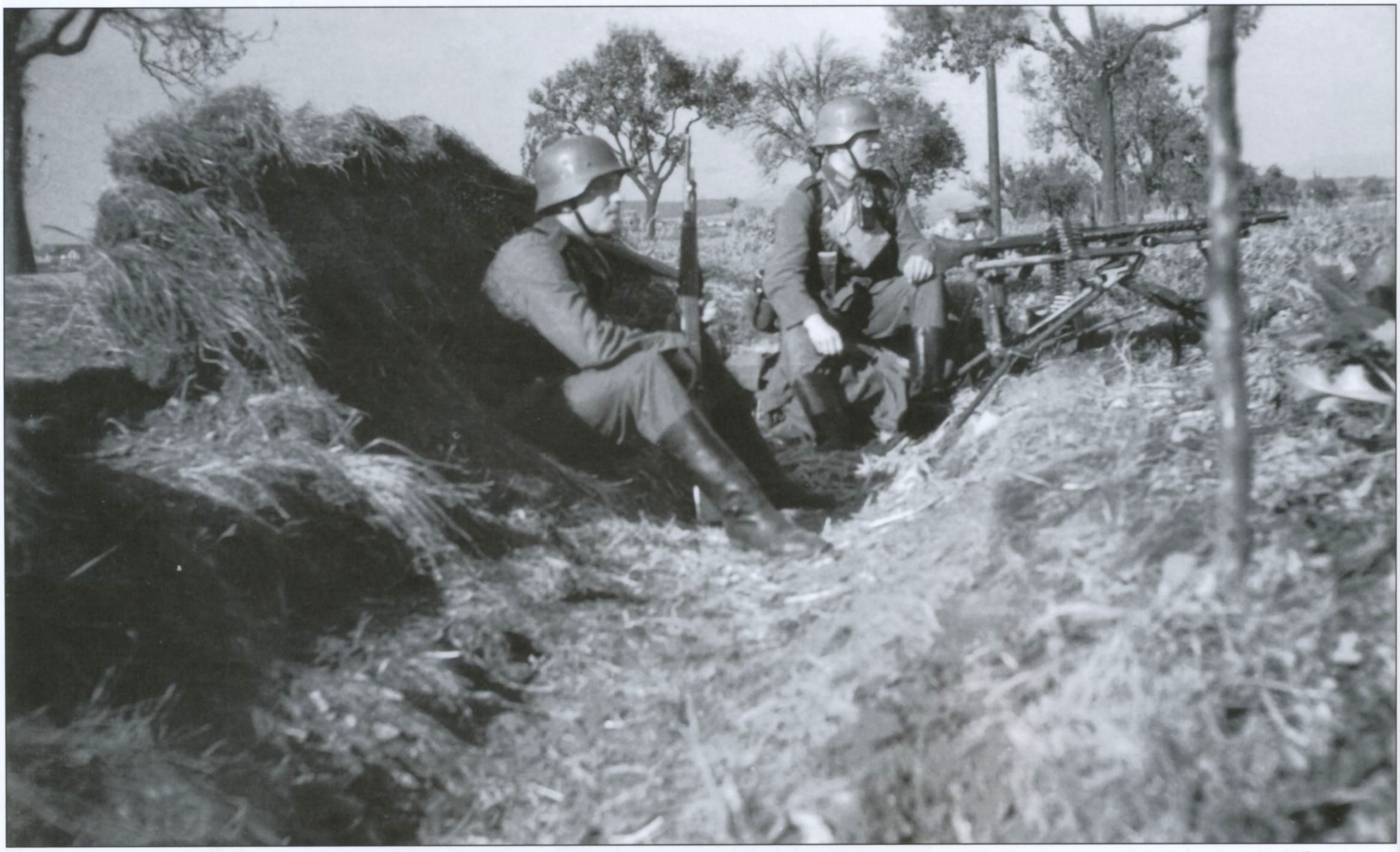
An 8.8cm flak gun opens fire during a night time Soviet aerial attack on German positions. Note the gun's limber positioned nearby. The limber were normally positioned like this in order for the crew to rapidly limber-up and re-position the gun.

A well placed and well camouflaged 8.8cm flak gun. This was the most famous German anti-aircraft gun of World War Two. The gun was bolted on a cruciform platform from which it fired with outriggers extended. Here in this photograph the crew have utilized the weapon in a ground attack role.

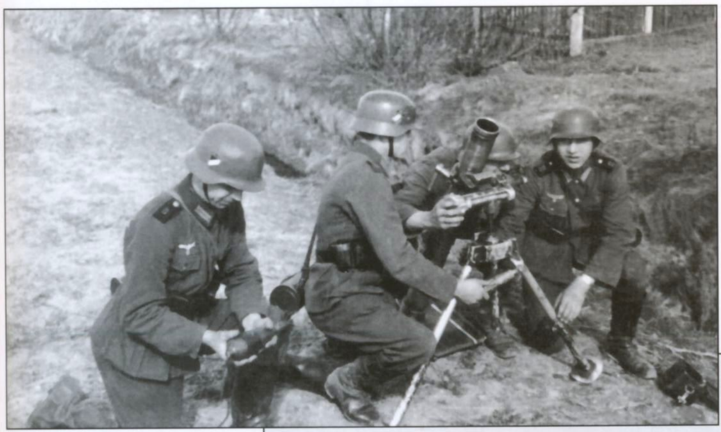
An MG34 heavy machine gun is positioned along a railway line covering an advancing rifle company. The infantry battalion's machine gun company had two heavy machine gun platoons, each with four guns. In open terrain they would protect the flanks of advancing rifle companies, as in this photograph.



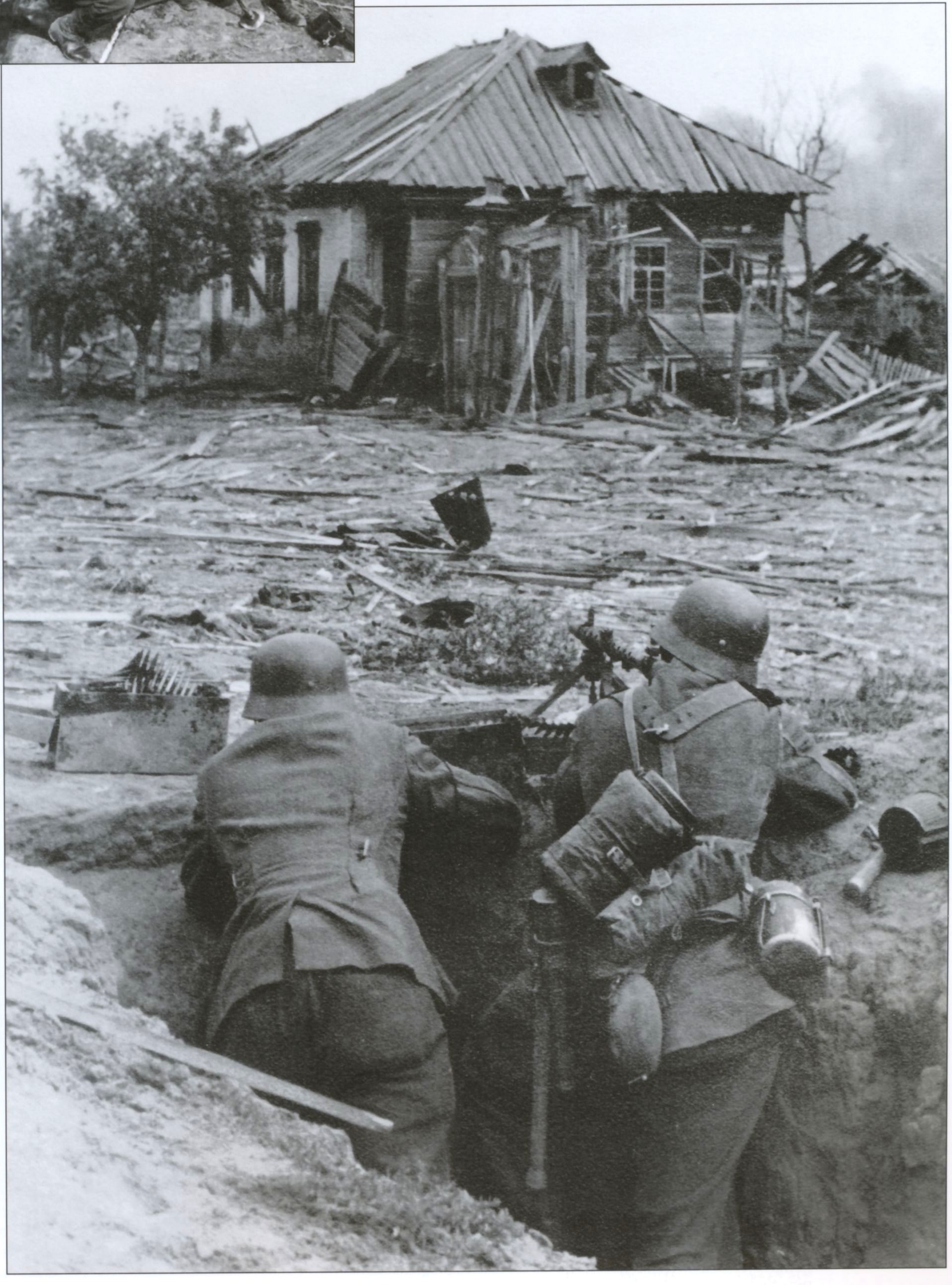
An interesting photograph showing the gun crew of the 7.5cm l.Gebirg.IG18 mountain version of the standard 7.5cm l.IG18 infantry gun. This field gun was not widely used by infantry regiments on the Eastern Front, but mainly by mountain troops. It was also used to limited extent by airborne units as well.



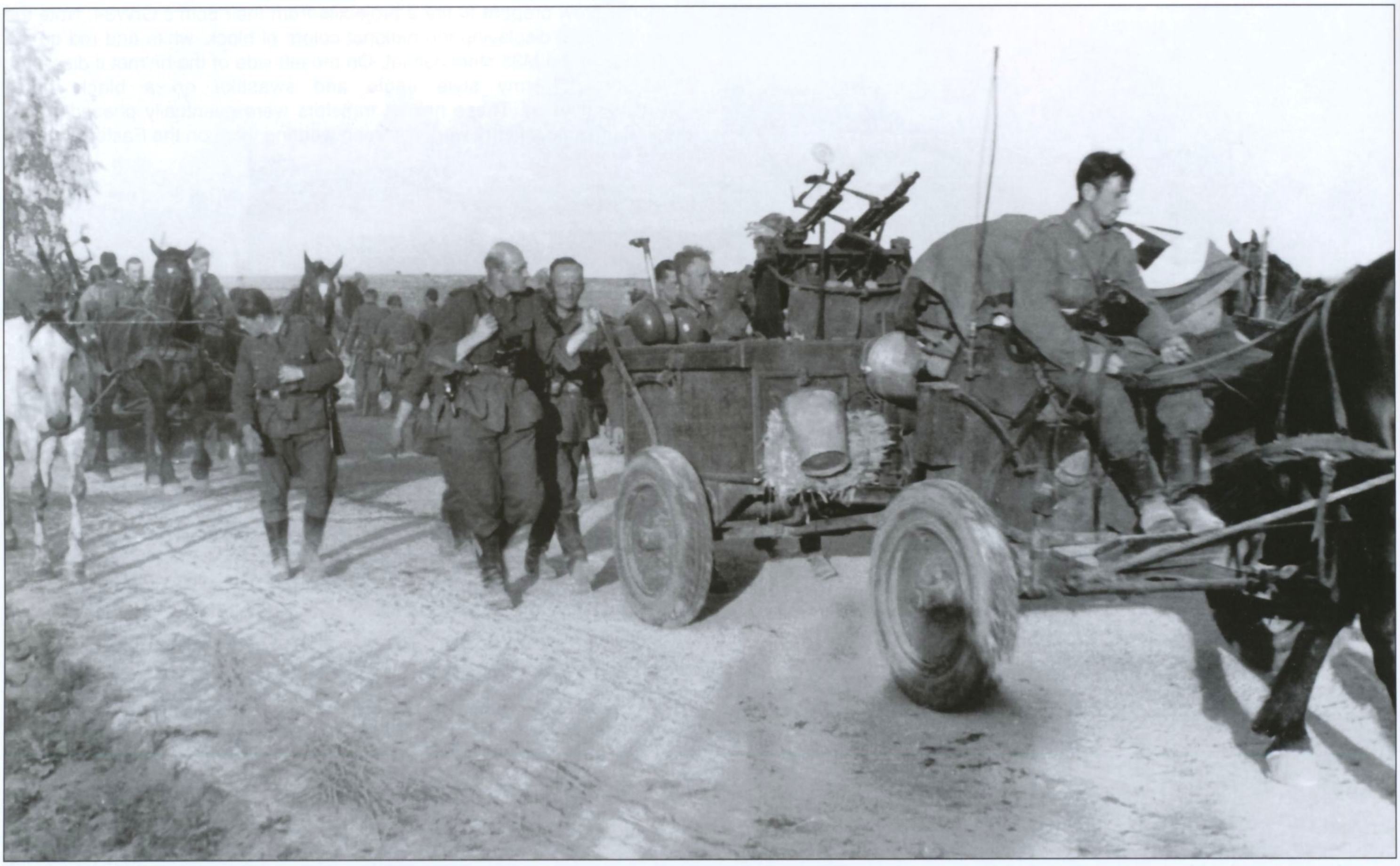
A MG34 heavy machine gun position on the sustained-fire mount. Each infantry battalion contained an MG Kompanie, which fielded eight MG34 heavy machine-guns on the sustained-fire mount.



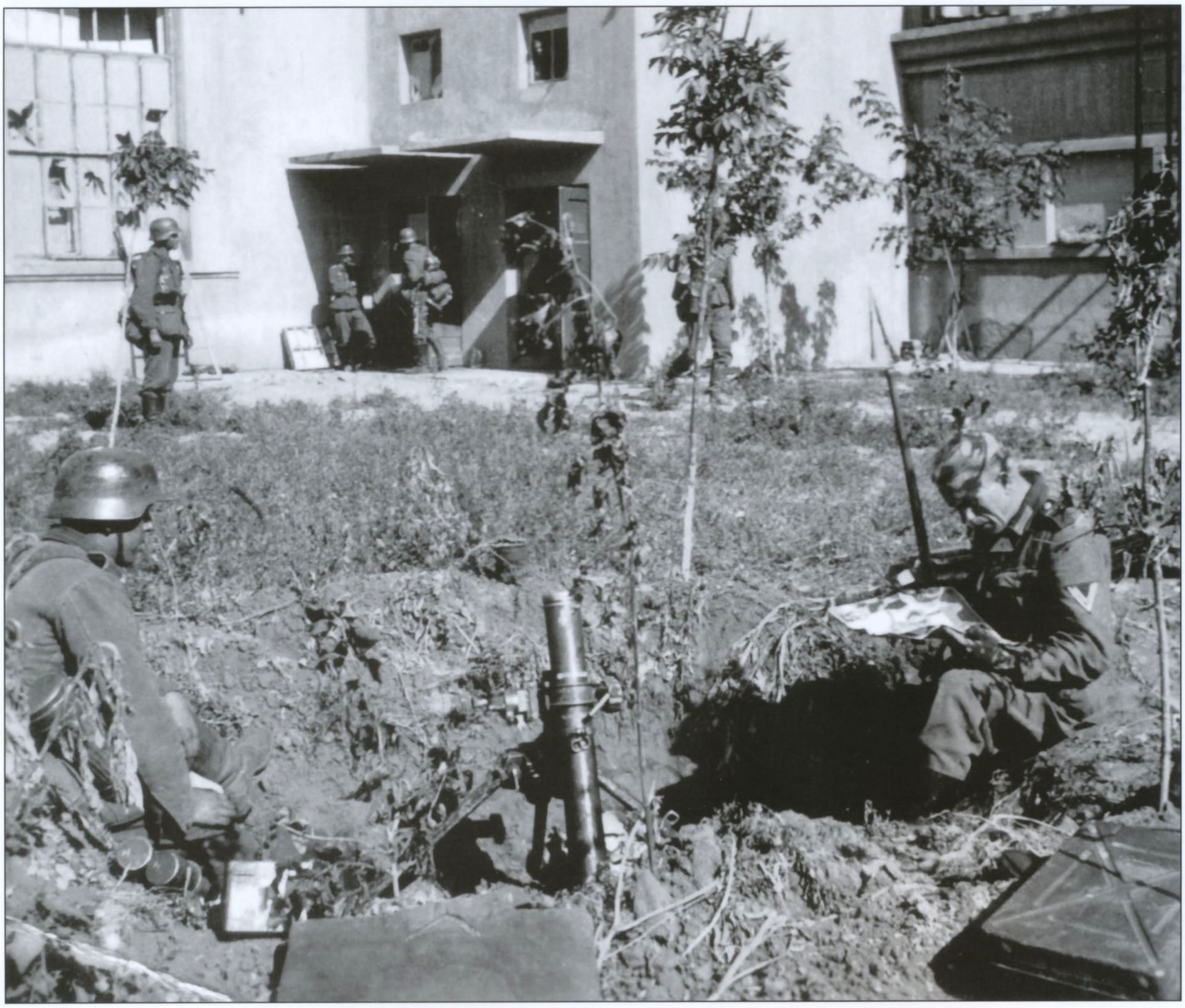
A mortar crew prepare to fire a projectile from their 8cm s.GrW34. Note the tri-color shield displaying the national colors of black, white and red on the right side of the M35 steel helmet. On the left side of the helmet it displayed the German Army style eagle and swastika on a black shield (Wehrmachtadler). These helmet transfers were eventually phased out by 1940, but some infantry were still seen wearing them on the Eastern Front in 1941.



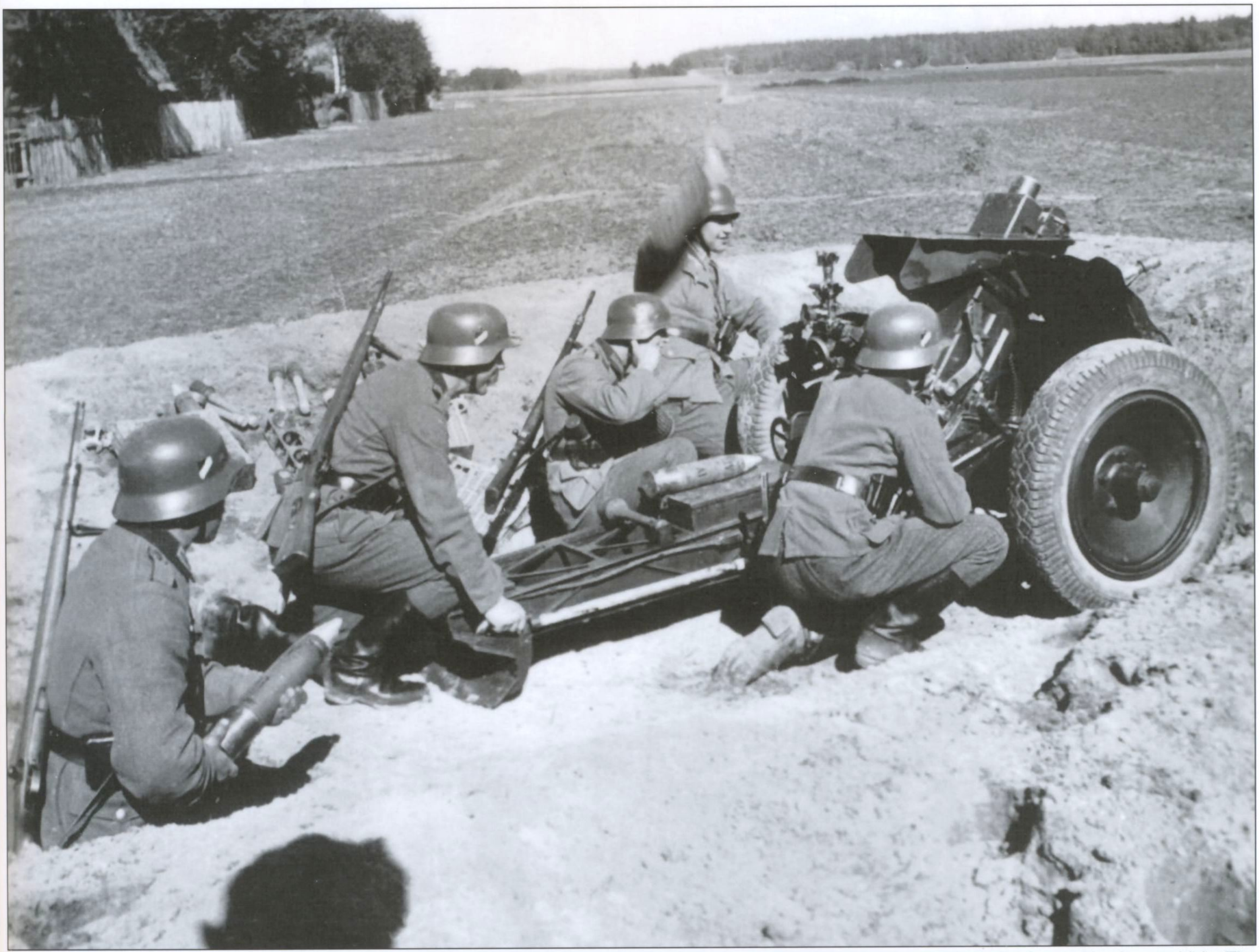
A German outpost during heavy fighting inside a destroyed town. The two Landser in the Stichgraben (slit trench) are armed with a light MG34 machine gun. The soldier on the right carries the standard infantryman's equipment which includes support ("Y" straps), gasmask canister, with gas cape strapped to it, Zeltbahn, bread bag, water bottle, entrenching tool, and Stg.24 stick hand grenades.



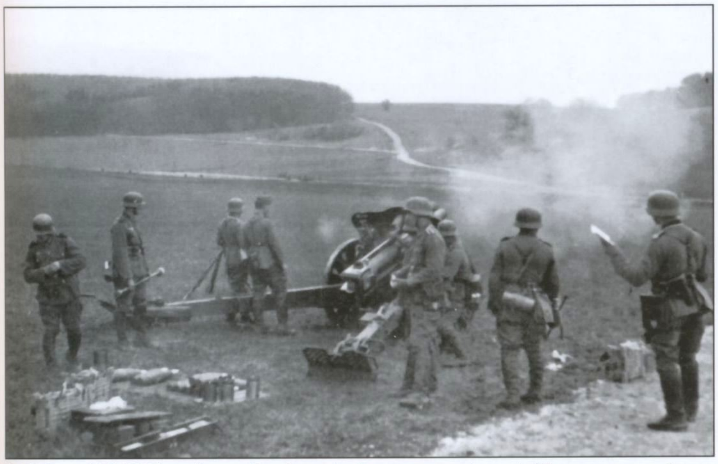
A unit passes along a dusty road aided by animal draught transportation. A steel bodied twin machine gun wagon (Maschinengewehr-Doppelwagen 36) can be identified being pulled along with the column towards the front. The wagon could be towed either by animal draught or a light field car. The MGs could easily be dismounted from their carriage fixings and used in action individually by an MG crew.



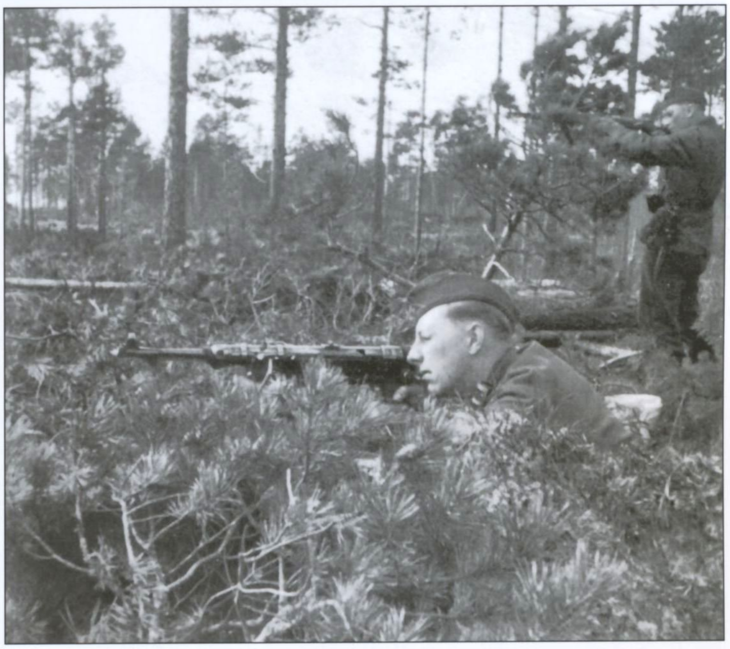
Mortar troops rest during a pause in the fighting with their well dug-in 8cm s.GrW34 mortar. It was very common for infantry, especially during intensive long periods of action, to fire their mortar from either trenches or dug-in positions where the mortar crew could also be protected from enemy fire.



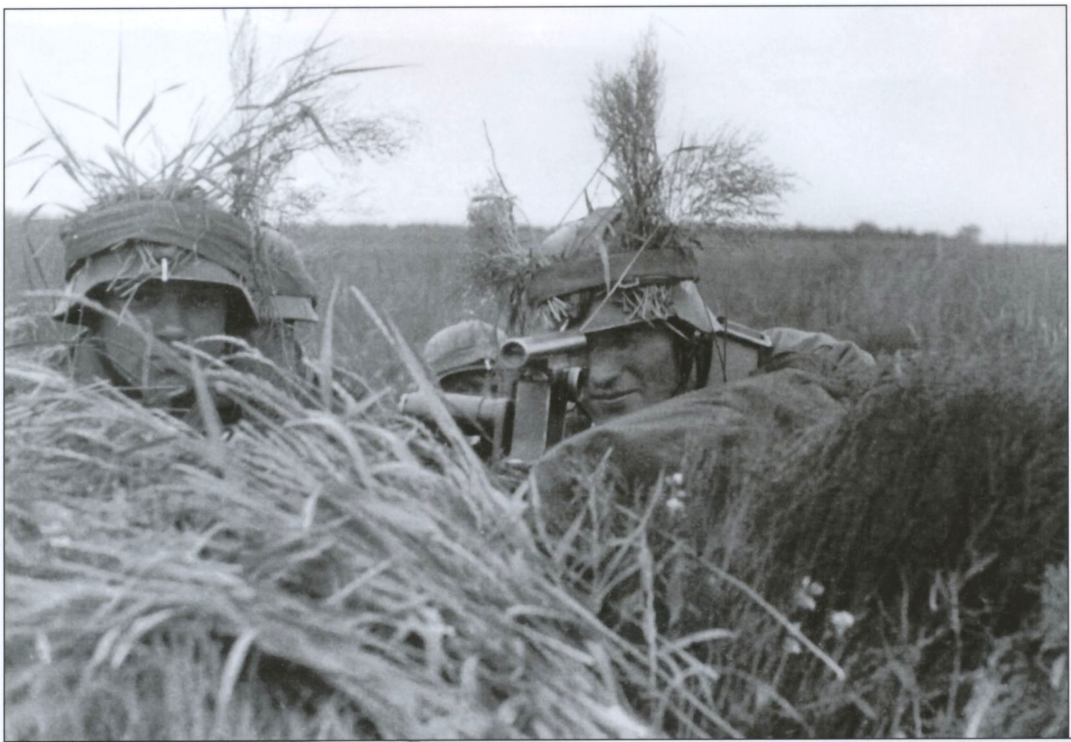
A 7.5cm l.IG18 is about to be fired. The weapon has steel discs with pneumatic tyres suggesting that the gun has been towed to its position by a vehicle. The use of pneumatic tyres reduced wear and tear and allowed the gun to be transported quicker.



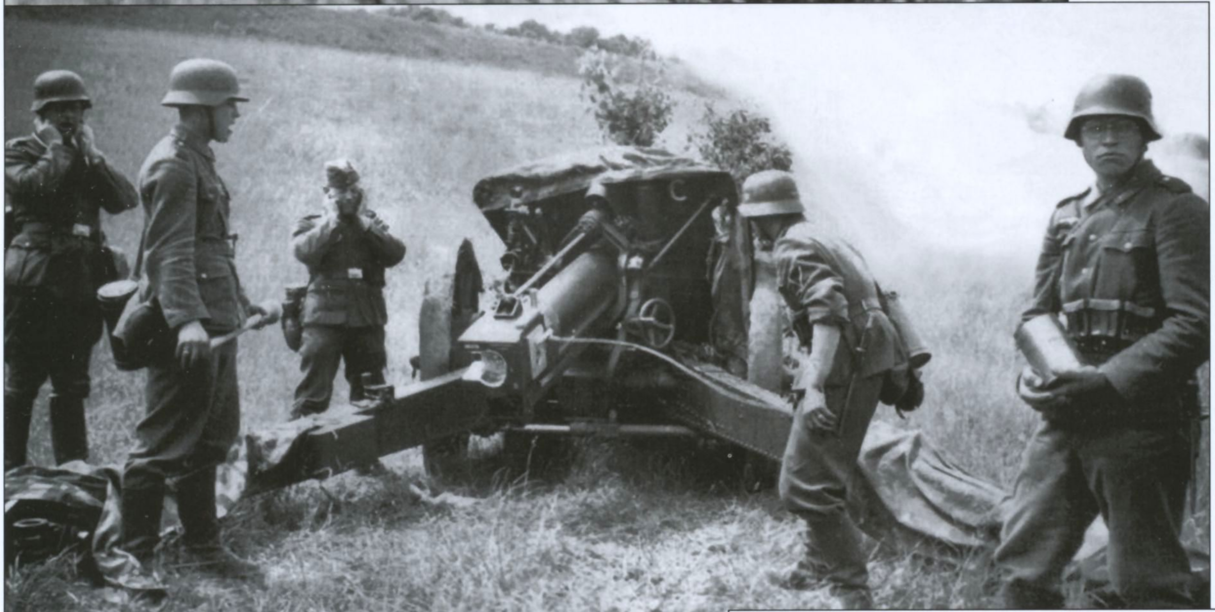
A 10.5cm l.FH18 has been fired against an enemy target. The gun crew have been watched by the battery's reporting NCO or "der Spiess". He is seen holding a note pad and is armed with a small calibre pistol and carries binoculars and a report/map case.



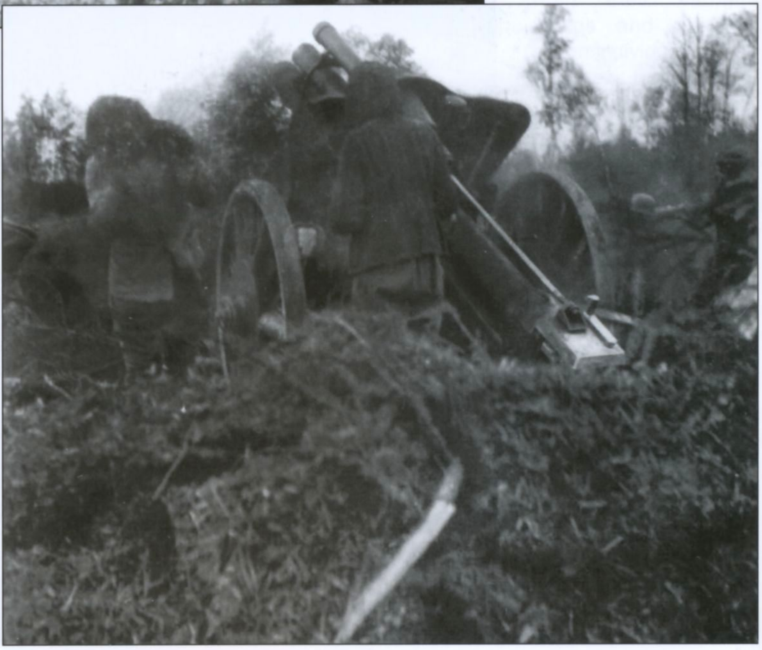
An interesting photograph showing two infantrymen, one armed with the 7.92mm Kar98k carbine bolt action Mauser rifle and the other with the 9mm MP38 or MP40 machine pistol. This photo is more than likely a posed shot for the cameraman. During hostile fighting the soldier armed with his Kar98k rifle would not expose himself by standing up - it would have been far too dangerous.



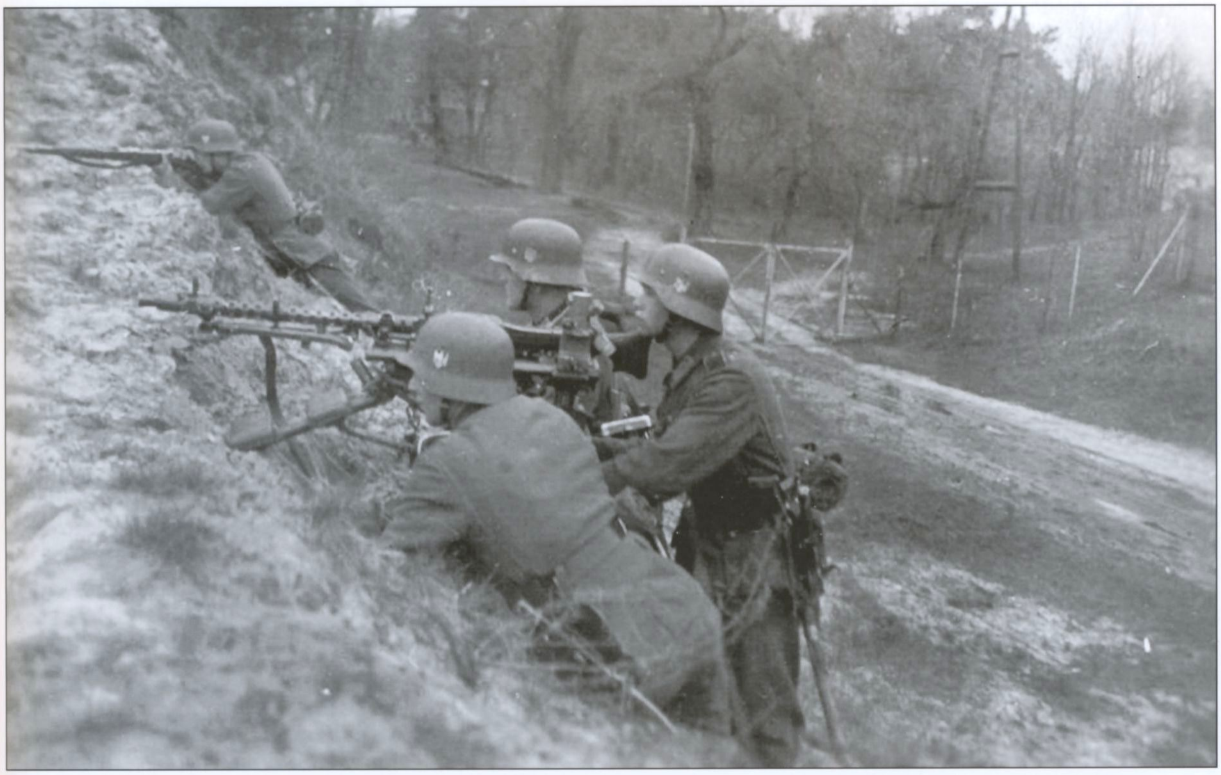
A well camouflaged PaK gun is concealed beneath straw. The gun layer checks the site and calculates the range and elevation required before ordering the crew to load and fire the weapon. At least three of the crew have their M35 steel helmets camouflaged with straw. Note how the foliage has been stuffed through the rubber rings.



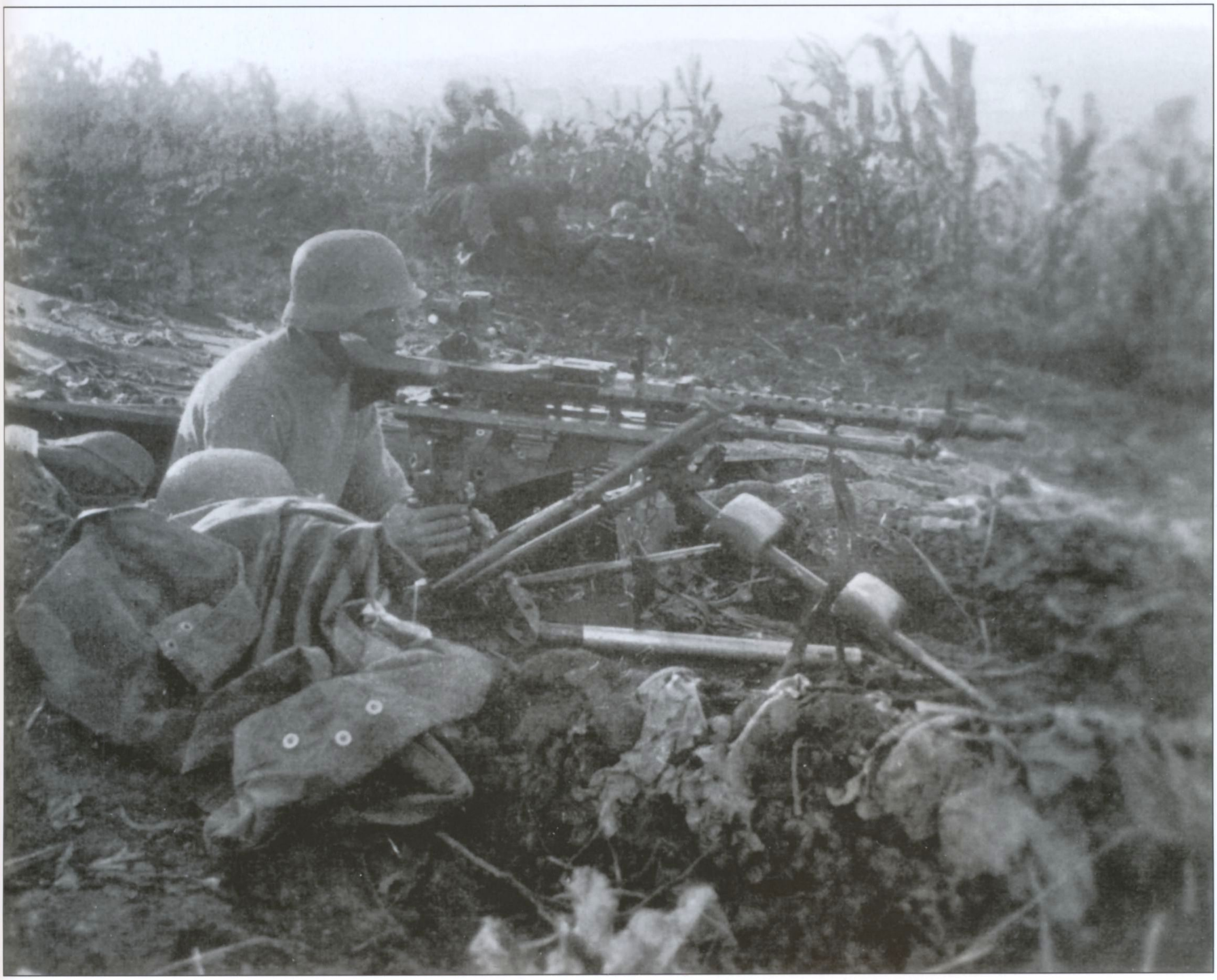
A photograph of a 10.5cm l.FH18 located in a field, and one of its shells has just been fired. The rammer can be seen on the left of the photo and an artilleryman on the right is holding one of the propellant charges. The noise of the gun can only be imagined by the two men plugging their ears.

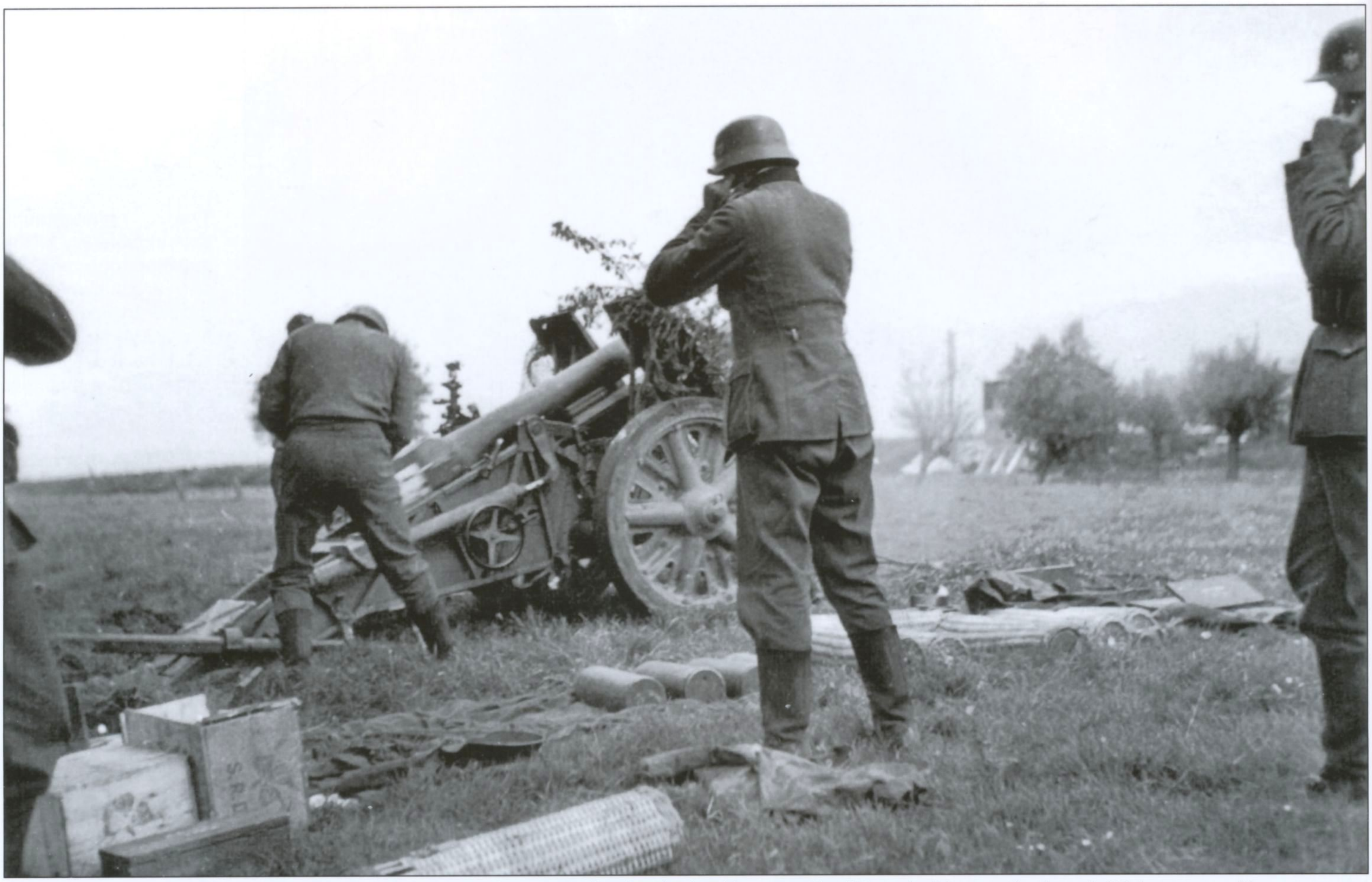


The artillery crew of a 10.5cm l.FH18 are wearing mosquito-proof head nets. Mosquitoes were a major problem for the soldiers in Russia, especially during the spring and summer periods.

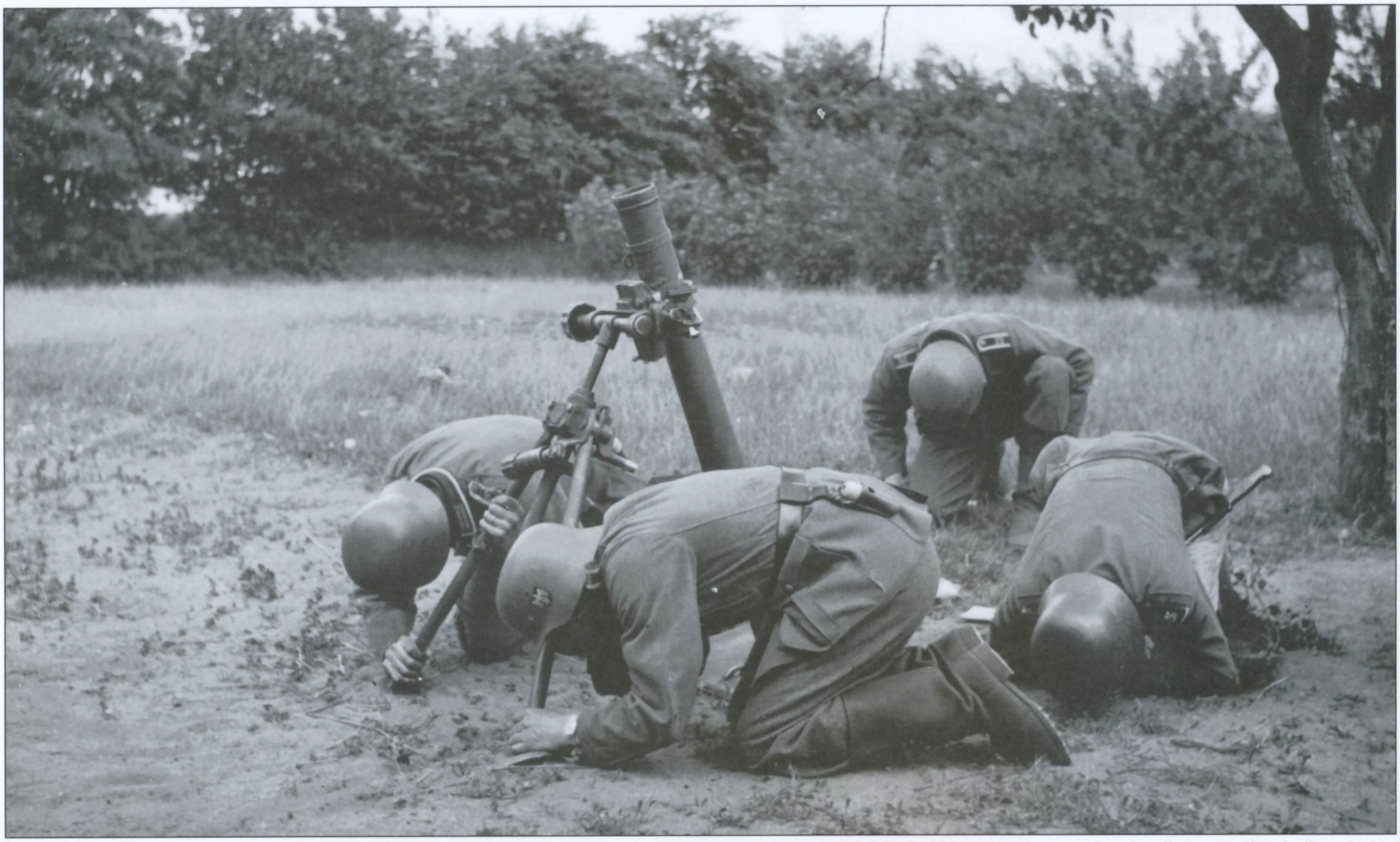


Two photographs showing a heavy MG34 machine gun position on a sustained-fire mount. In open terrain the MG34 machine gun squad would use their sustained fire-mount to protect the flanks of advancing rifle companies. However, in built-up areas the crews often had to operate forward with the rifle platoons and in light machine gun roles with bipods only. They were able to sometimes take advantage of the situation and revert back to a heavy machine gun role.

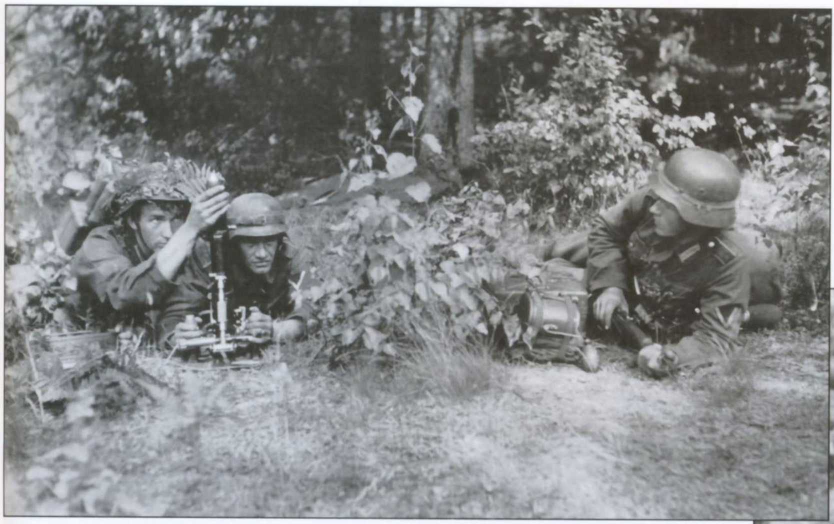




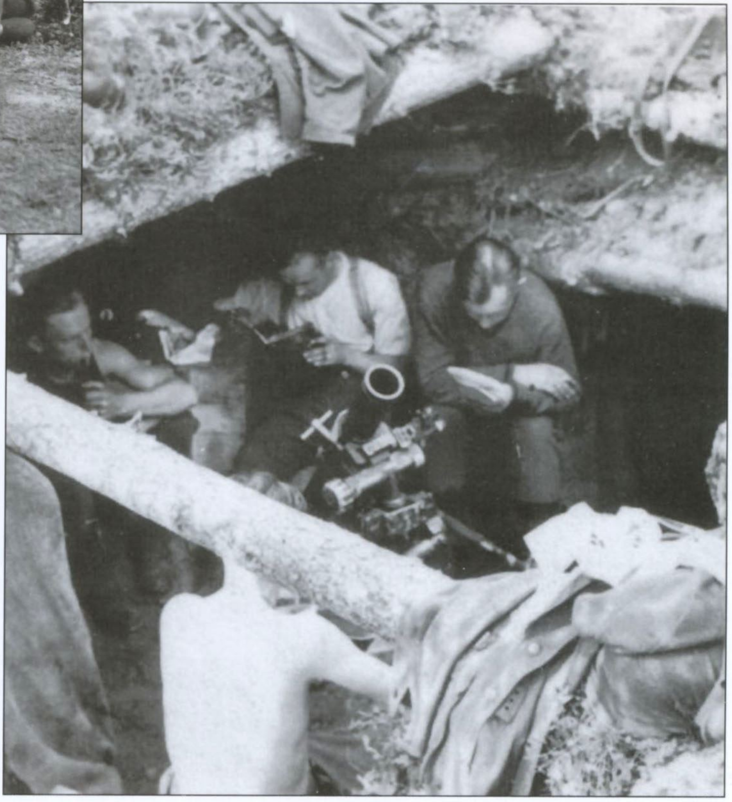
The crew of a 15cm s.IG33 infantry gun plug their ears in preparation for the loud bang as the 15cm shell leaves the barrel. Wicker ammunition cases can be seen laid out ready to be primed. While the s.IG33 was a reliable and robust weapon, it was rather heavy for an infantry gun. Nonetheless it was used with great success, especially during the early part of the war in Russia.



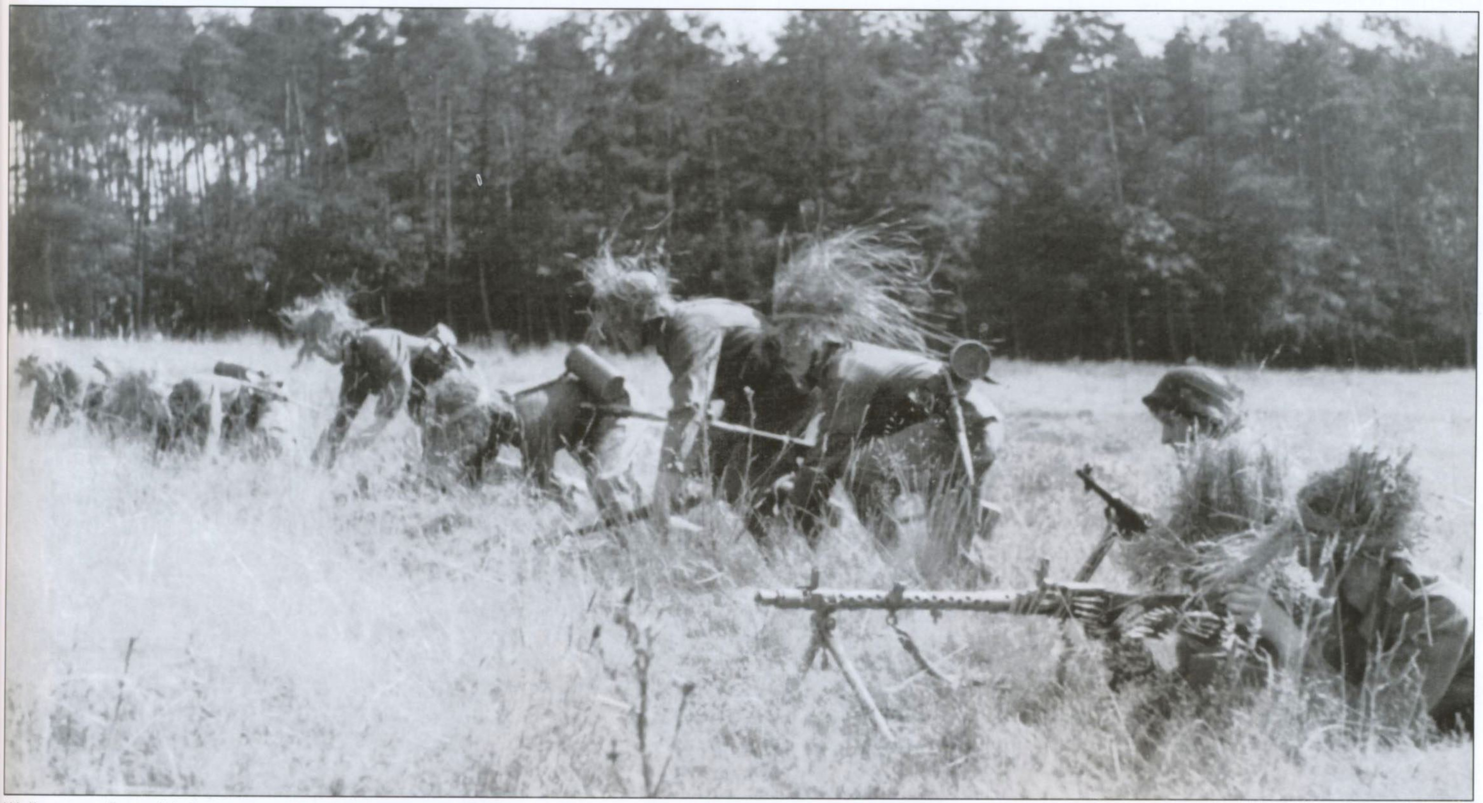
In action is an 8cm schwerer Granatwerfer 34 or 8cm s.GrW34 (heavy grenade-launcher model 1934). This mortar earned a deadly reputation in line during the battle of Smolensk and captured 34s were eagerly employed against the Germans.



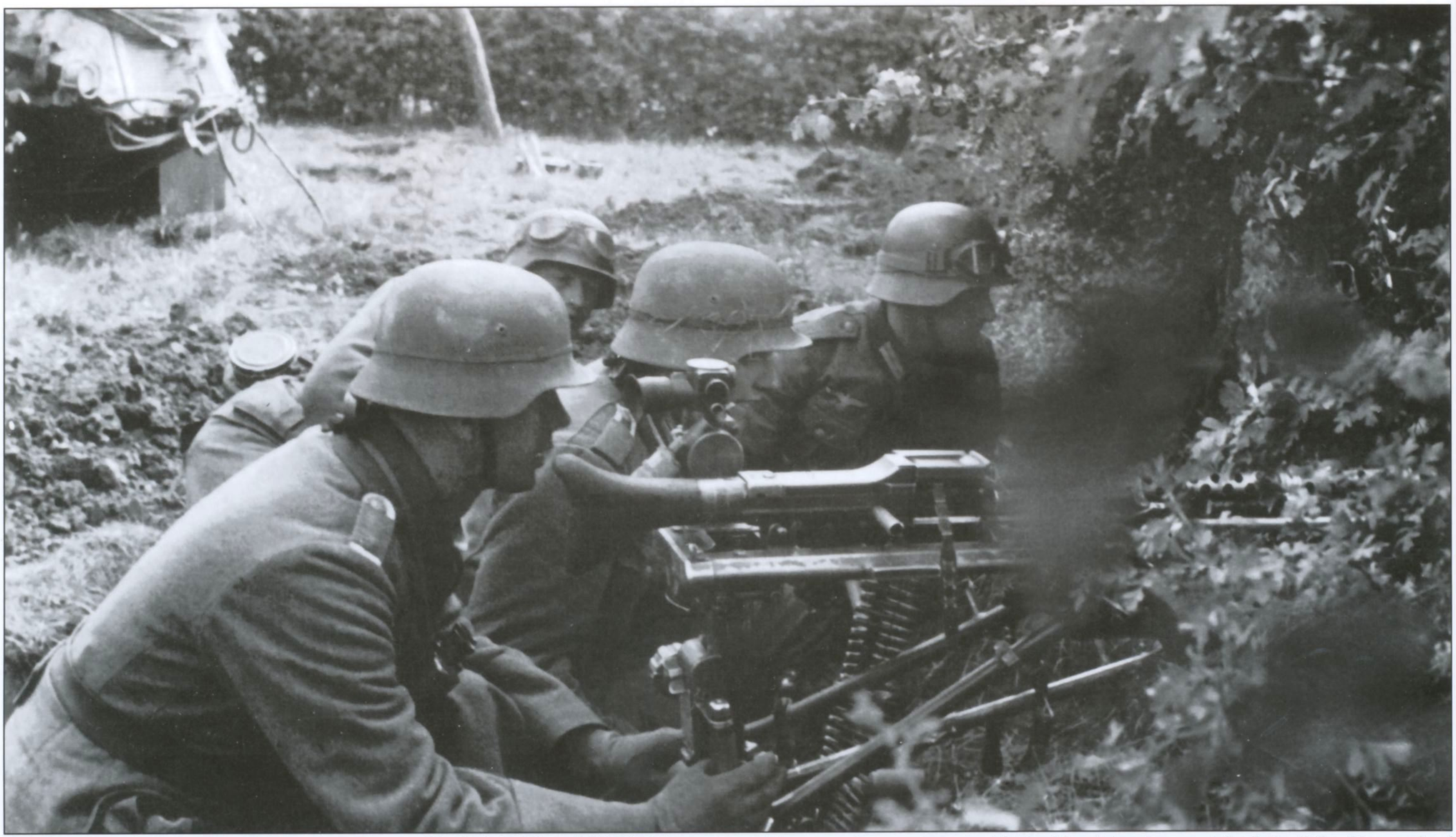
A mortar crew about to fire-off a projectile from their 5cm l.GrW36 mortar. Although by 1942 this mortar was generally phased out, in 1941 it was used widely by mortar crews and had already become a standard infantry weapon both in attack and defense.



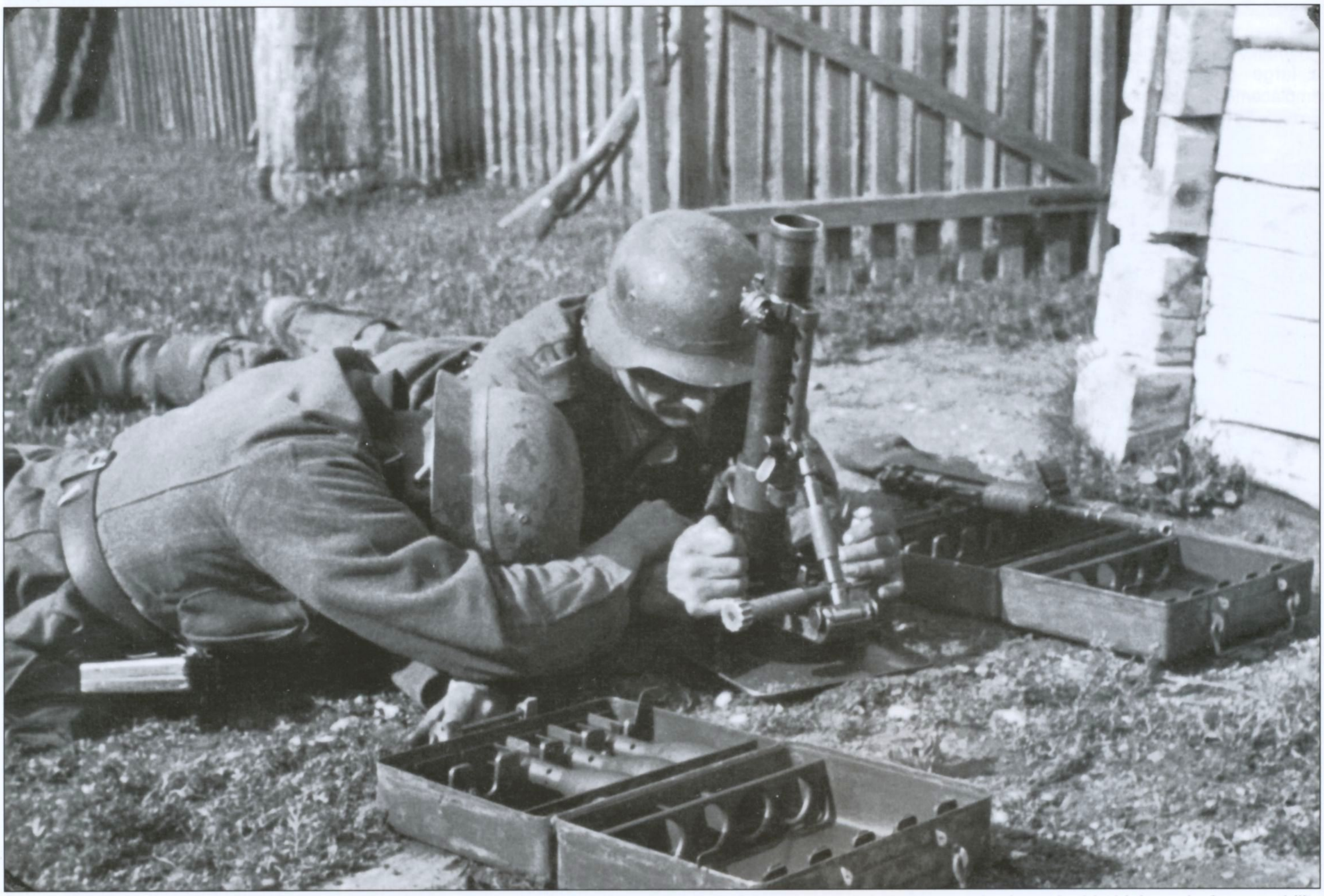
An interesting photograph showing a mortar crew with their 8cm s.GrW34 in a large dug-in position in the Roslavl area. These large mortar emplacements also sheltered the entire crew in what became known as group and half-group living bunkers.



Well camouflaged infantry supported by a light MG34 machine gun on a bipod move forward across an open field. All the soldiers have camouflaged their steel helmets with straw by securing them with a rubber band. Note the unit leader to the right of the machine gunner armed with the 9mm MP38/40 machine pistol.

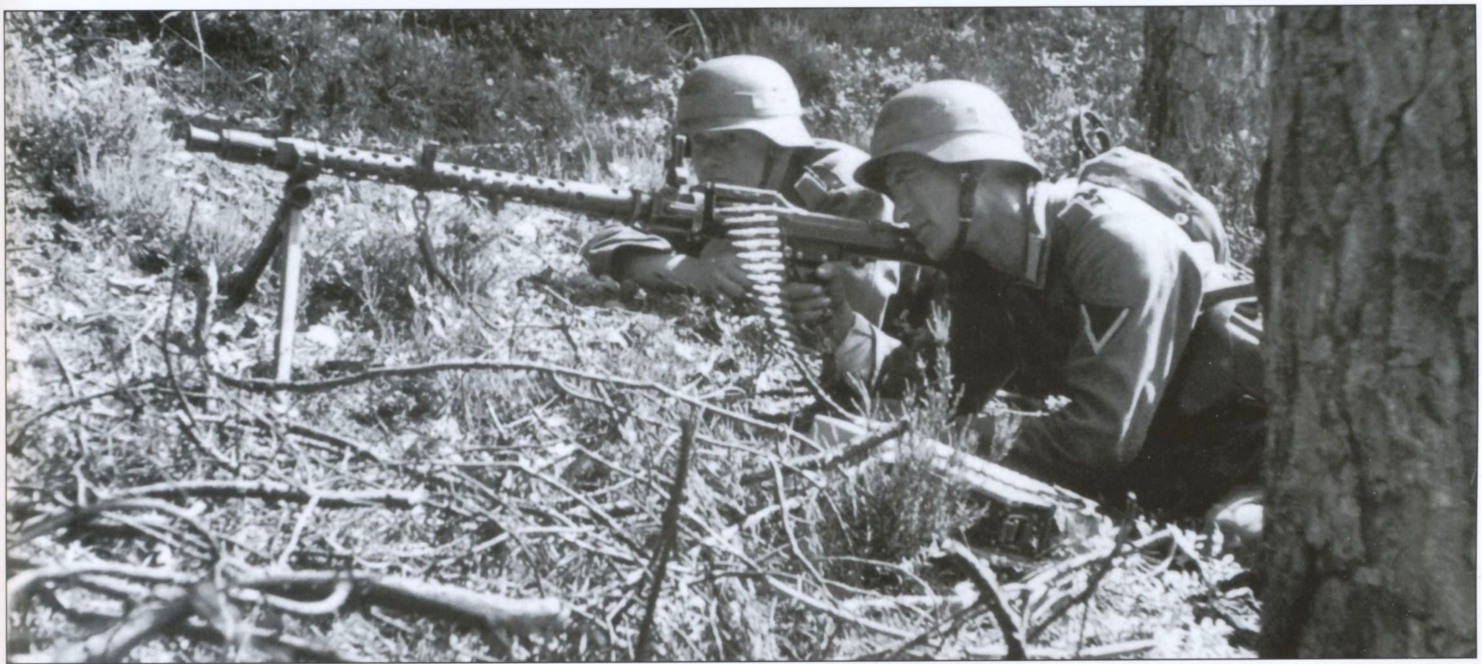


A well concealed heavy machine gun troop with their 7.92cm MG34. A heavy machine gun troop was provided with a tripod mount (Lafette 34) with a pair of leather carrying slings (Trageriemen), long-range optical sight (Zeileinrichtung 34), at least two-barrel spare barrel carriers (Laufbehälter 34), belt filling device (Gurtfüller 34) and a number of 300-round metal cartridge cases, plus various cleaning equipment.

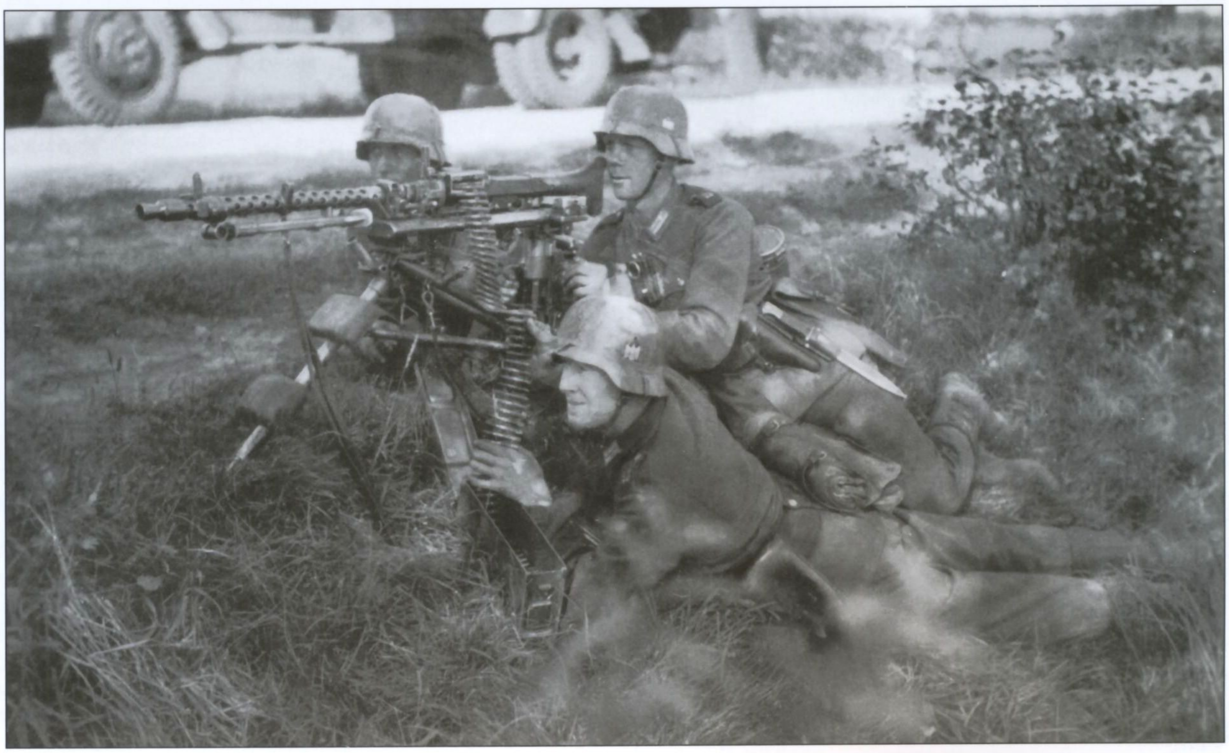


A mortar crew prepare to fire their projectile from the 5cm l.GrW36 mortar. In both defense and attack the mortar had a valuable high explosive capability beyond the range of rifles or hand grenades.

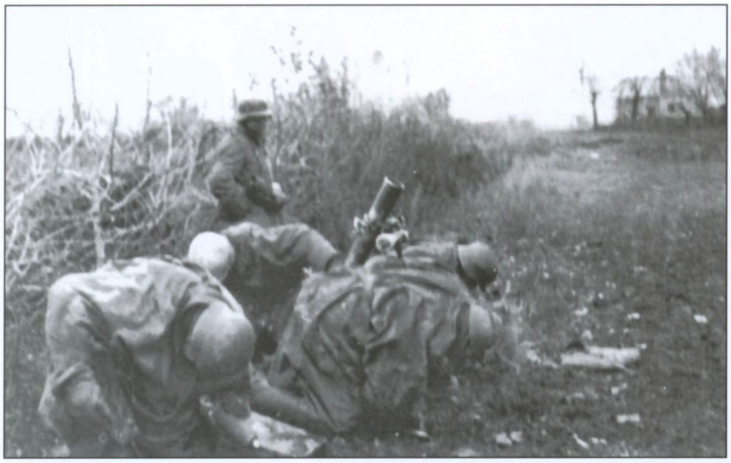
Supporting infantry follow a StuG.III assault gun into a Soviet town, which has just fired a shell at a building, suggesting that the town is still being defended by a number of determined Russian soldiers. Although the StuG.III was an effective infantry support weapon because it had a fixed turret it was not well suited to urbanized combat and was therefore only used in a limited role during close quarter engagements like this.

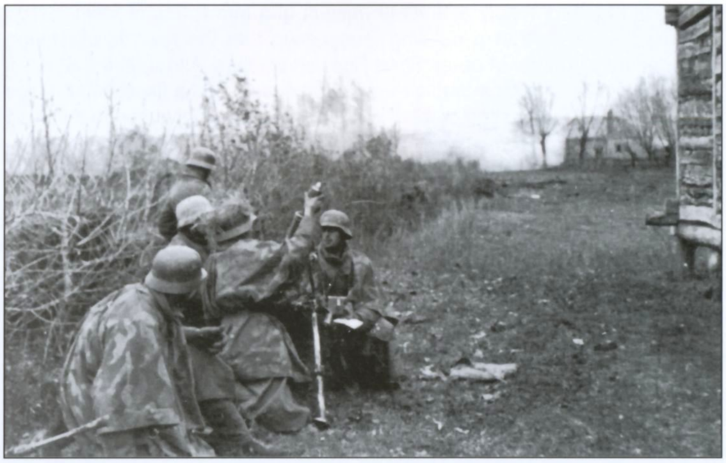


Two members of a 7.92mm MG34 team prepare to open fire on suspected enemy targets. This light MG is being used from its bipod mount. With the bipod extended and the belt loaded, the machine gunner could effectively move the weapon quickly from one position to another and throw it to the ground and put it into operation, with deadly effect.

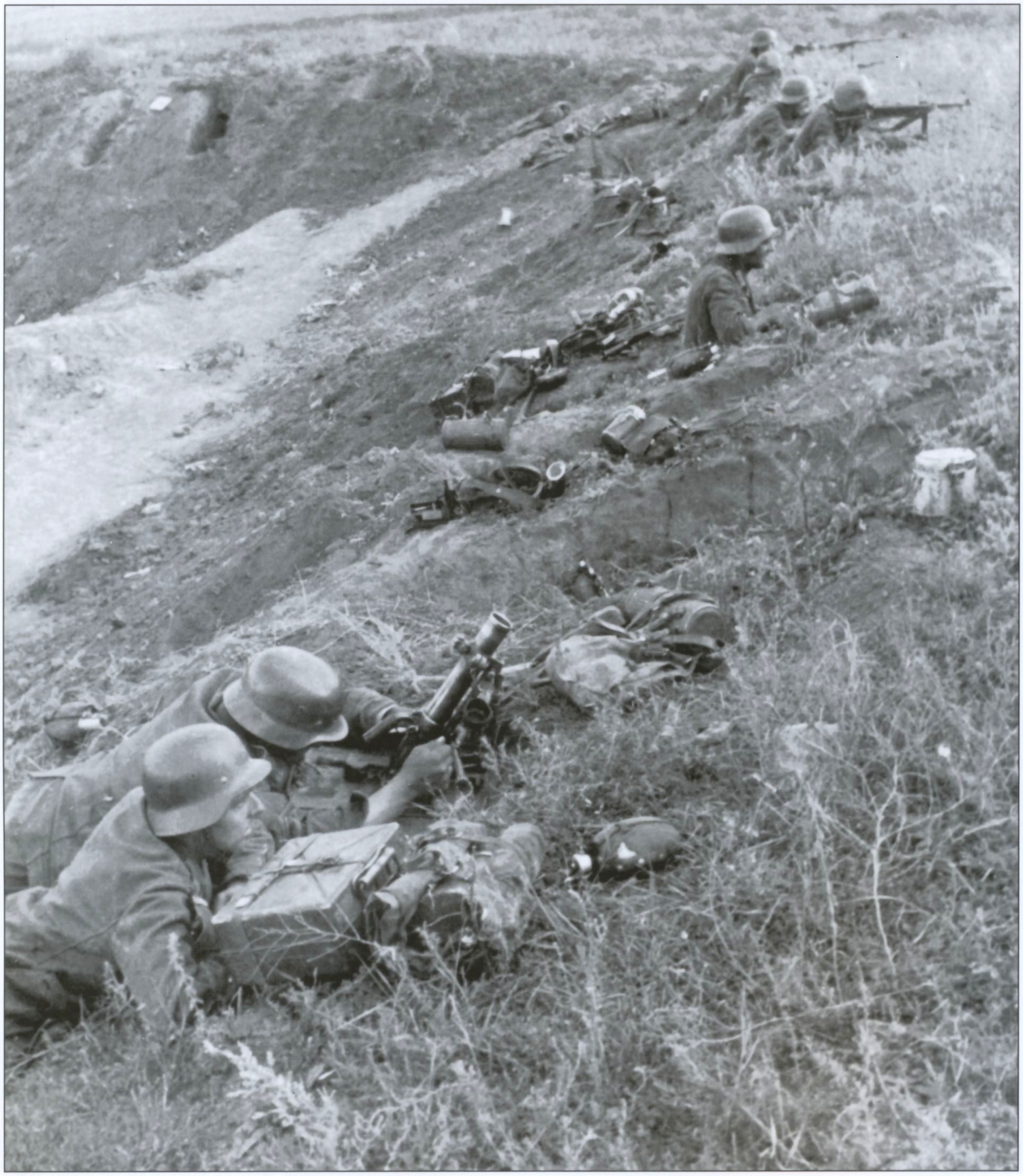


In action a three man heavy MG34 squad with their 7.92cm machine gun mounted on the Lafette 34 tripod. Note the pads on the front of the tripod which allowed the MG carrier to sling the weapon over his shoulder with the pads resting on the carrier's back.

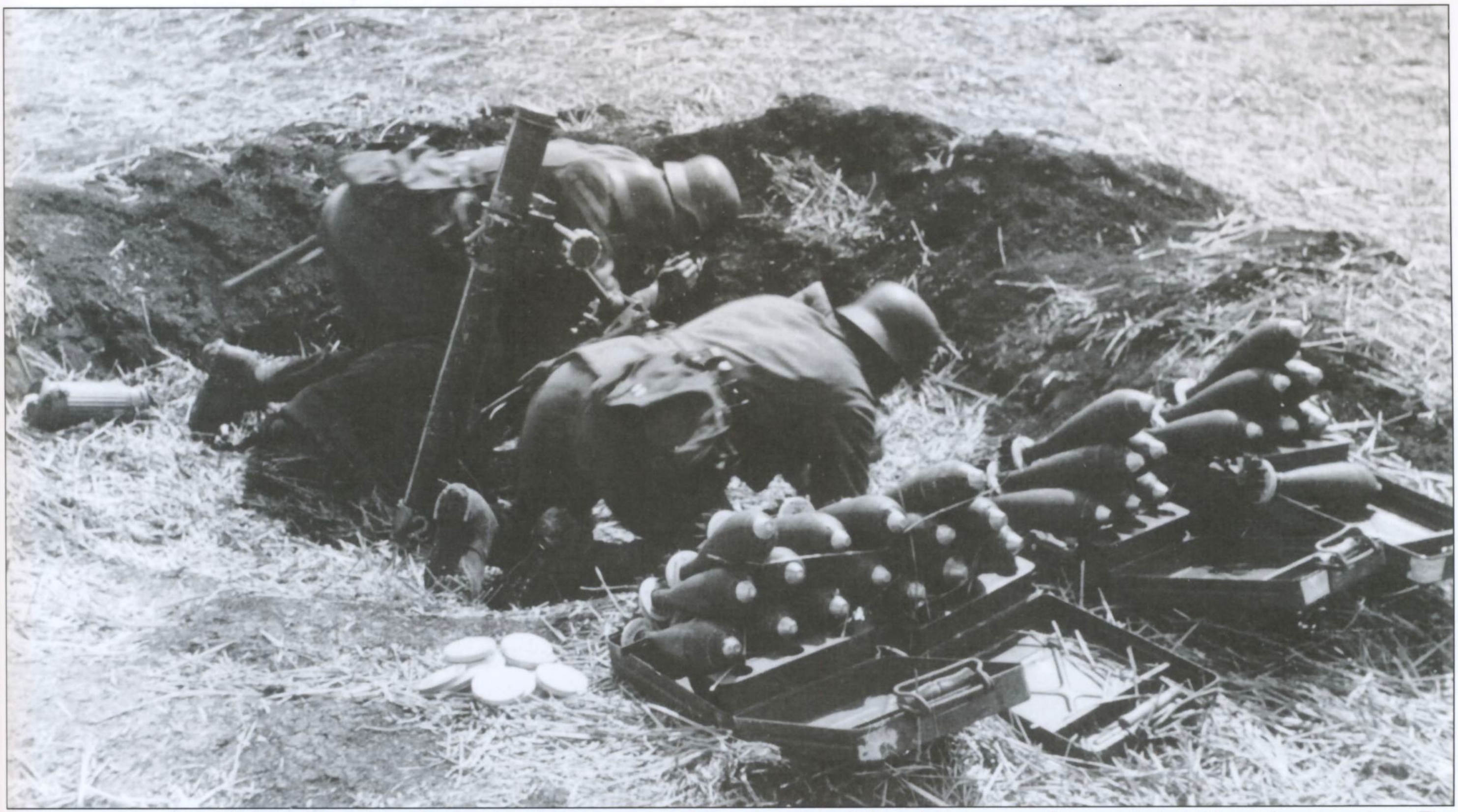




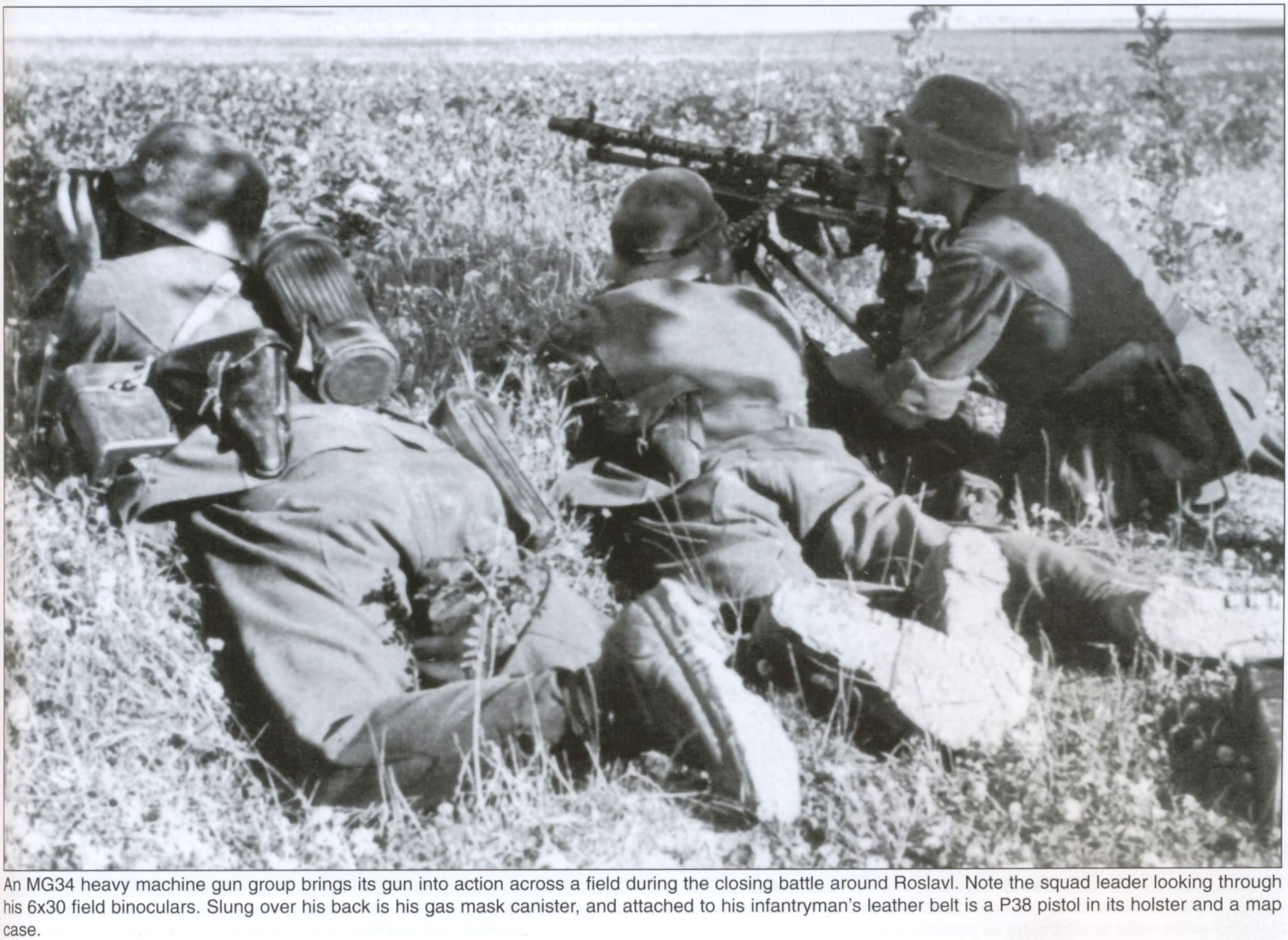
Two photographs showing a mortar crew in action with their 8cm s.GrW34 mortar. Although very effective during infantry fighting the mortar was not a very accurate weapon. Generally it required at least several projectiles to achieve a direct hit on a target. The mortar troops are all wearing the "Zeltbahn" in order to protect themselves from the heavy down pour of rain. There were various methods of wearing the "Zeltbahn". It could be used as a poncho for dismounted troops, as in this photograph, and it could also be worn for mounted and bicycle mounted soldiers.



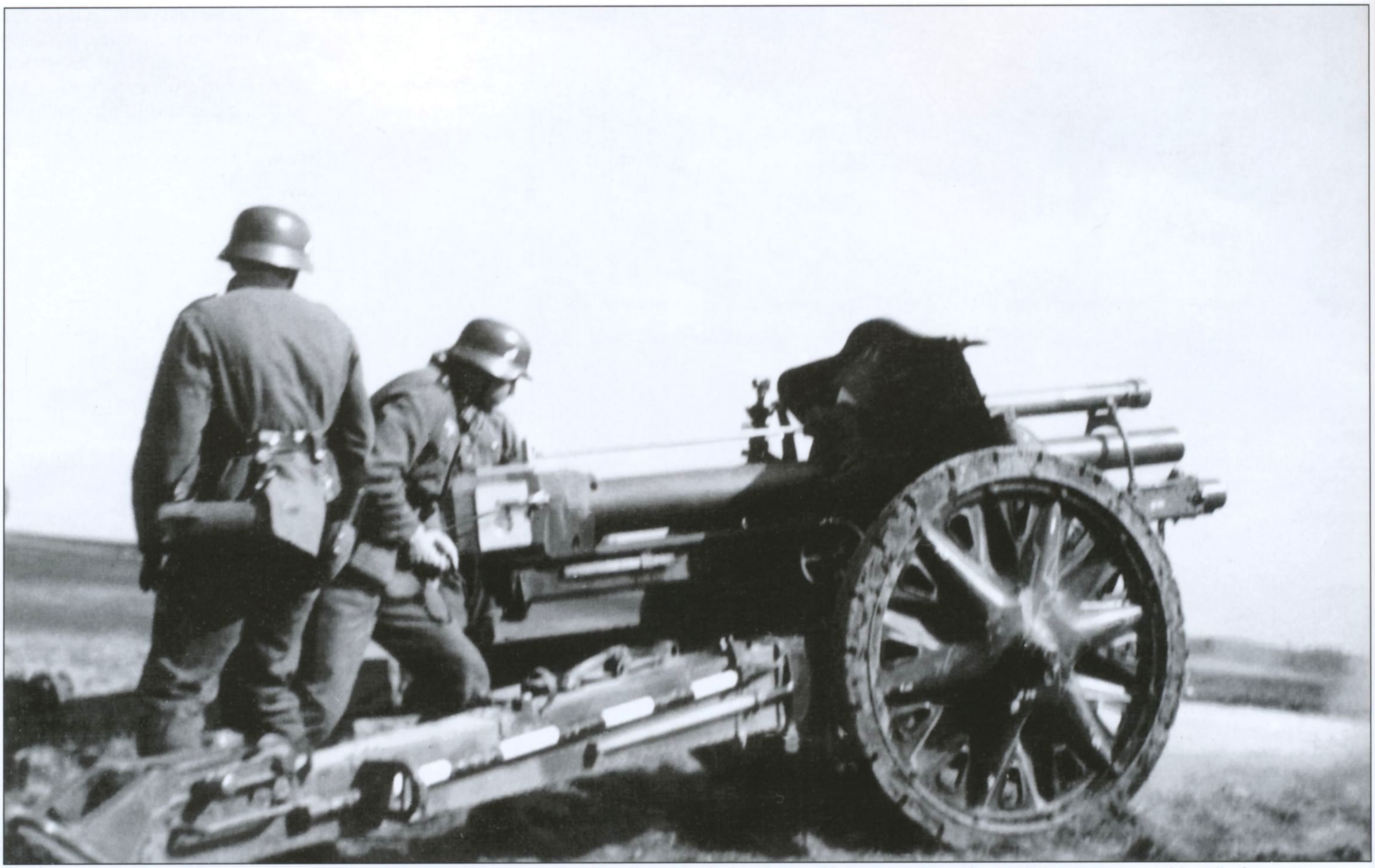
A number of infantry use a defended gully to protect themselves and fire their weapons across open terrain. Various infantry weapons can be seen including the Kar98k bolt action rifle, MP38/40 machine pistol and the 5cm l.GrW36 mortar. The soldiers have removed virtually all their personal kit, which suggests they may have been in this defended position for some considerable time.



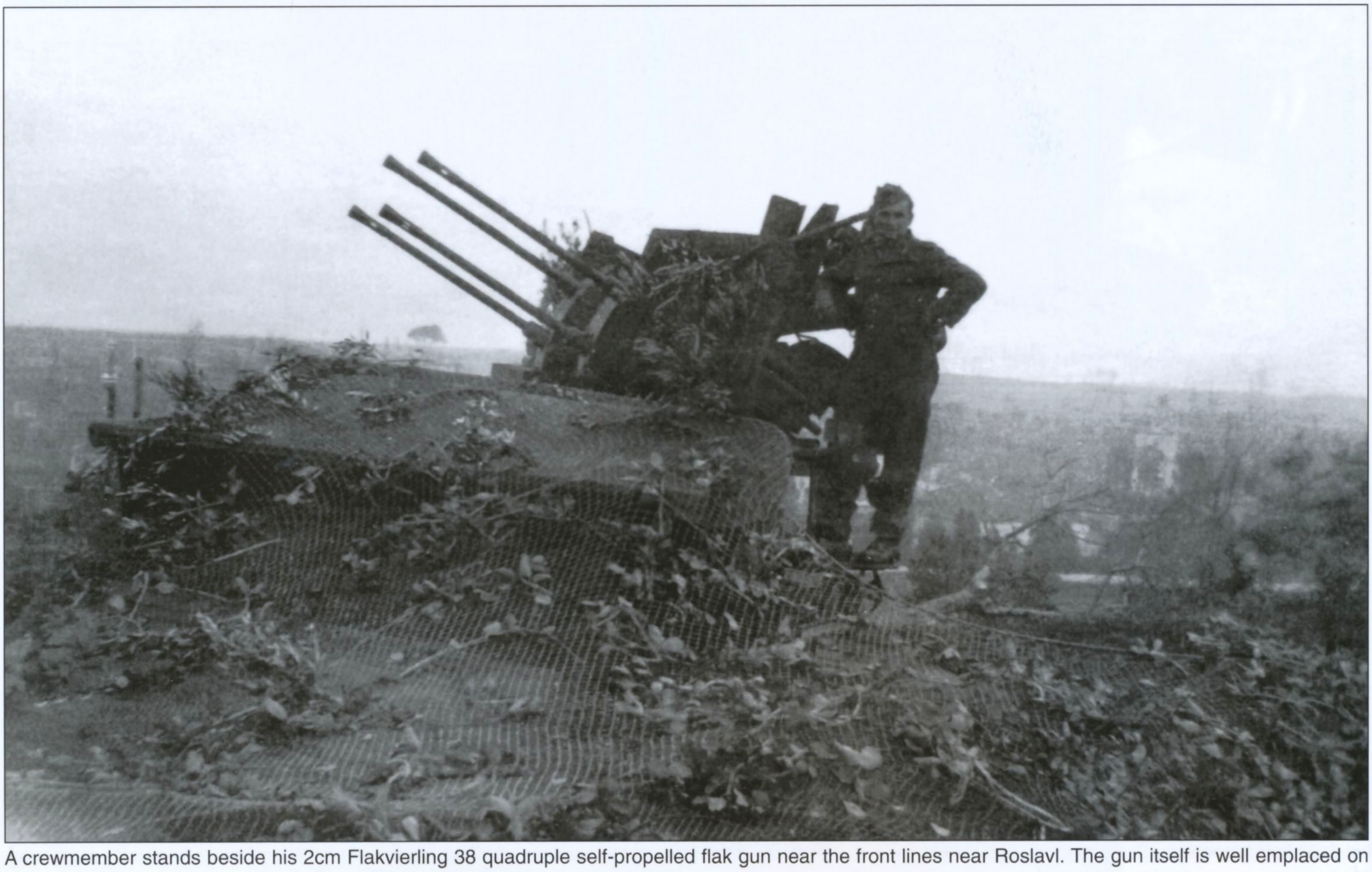
A well-dug and well-supplied mortar position during intensive action against an enemy target. A mortar crew usually consisted of at least three members. The gunner controlled the deflection and elevation of the weapon. The assistant gunner loaded the round at the command of the gunner. The ammunition man prepared and handed over ammunition to assist the gunner.



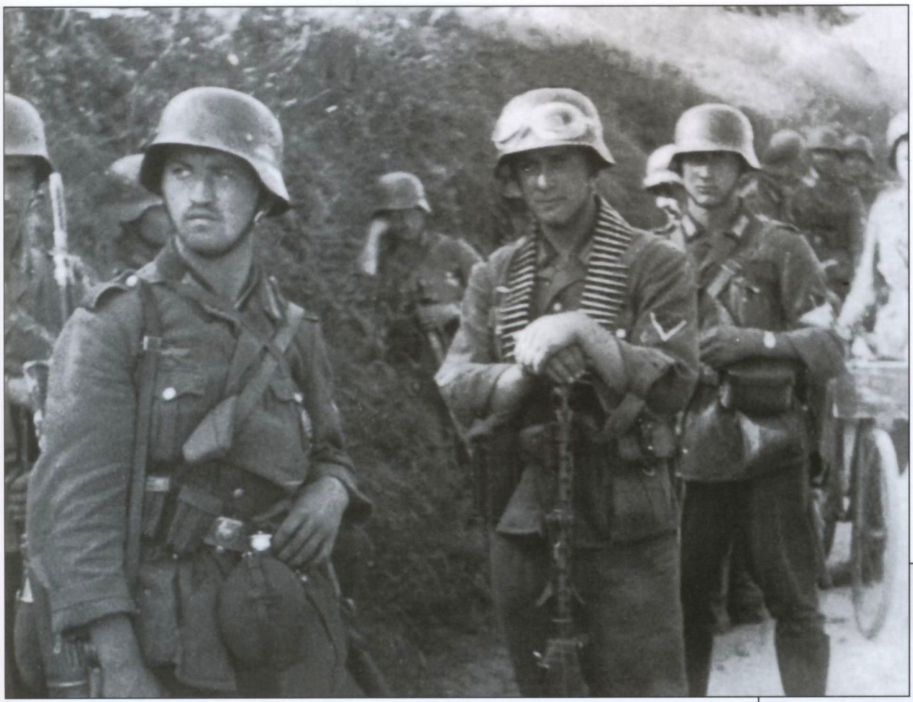
An MG34 heavy machine gun group brings its gun into action across a field during the closing battle around Roslavl. Note the squad leader looking through his 6x30 field binoculars. Slung over his back is his gas mask canister, and attached to his infantryman's leather belt is a P38 pistol in its holster and a map case.



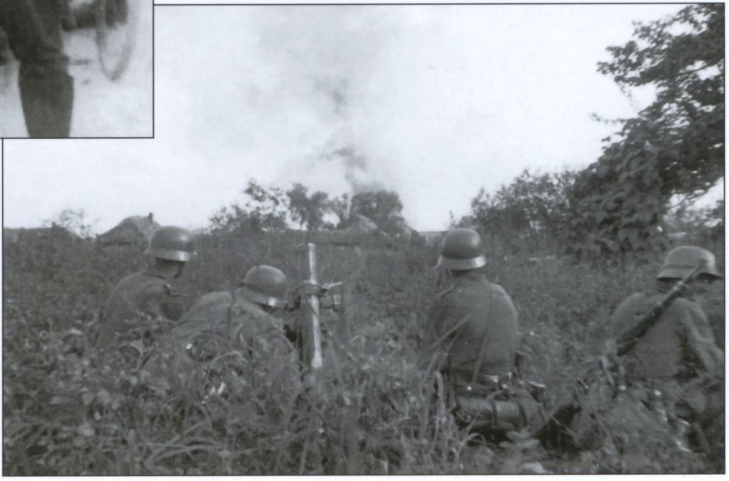
A photograph taken the moment a 10.5cm l.FH18 howitzer is fired by its crew. In total, the 10.5cm howitzer had a nine-man crew. Usually fewer are seen serving this piece because often some of the crew were to the rear with the horses, limber and caisson. Note the red and white-striped aiming stick attached to the gun's trail spade.



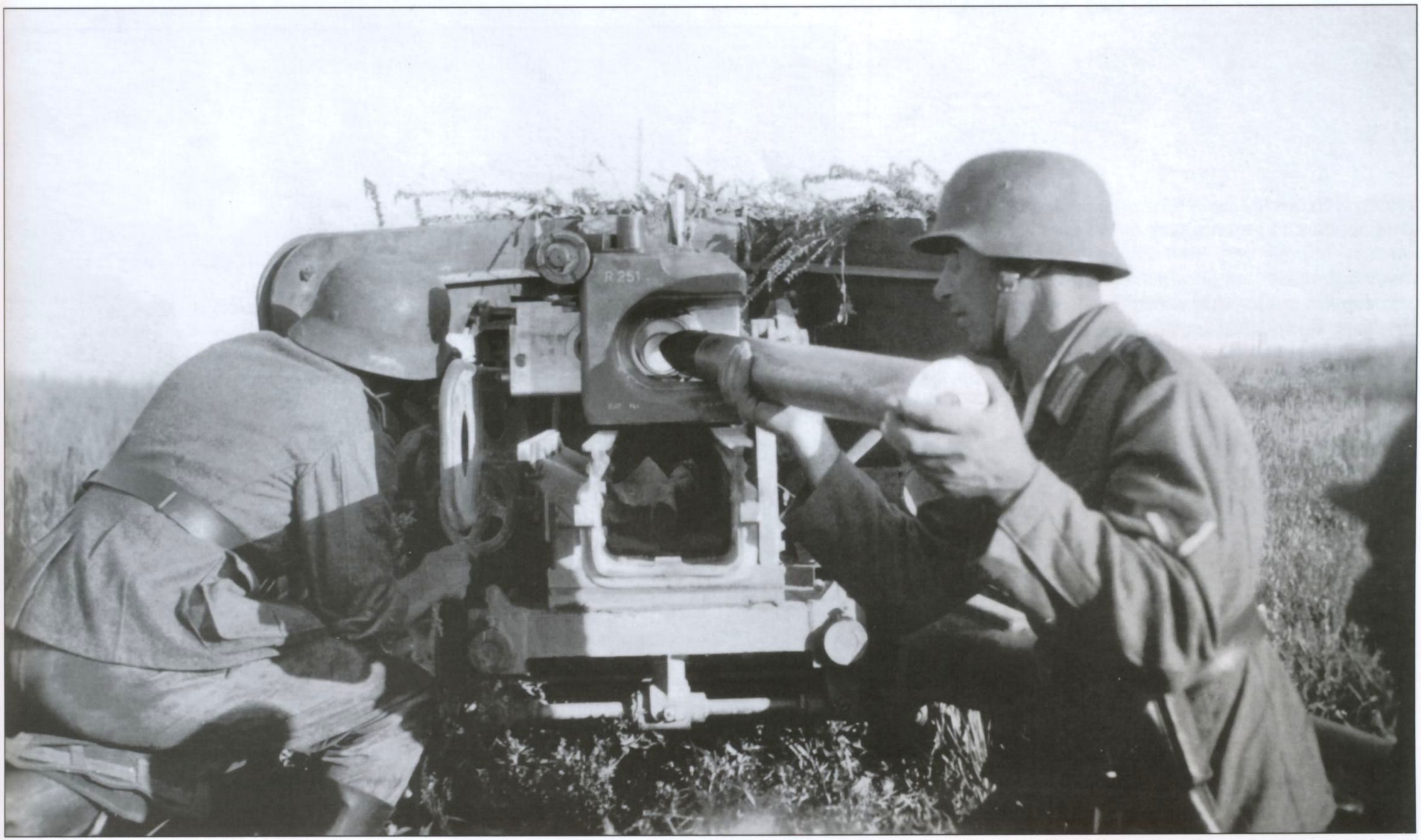
A crewmember stands beside his 2cm Flakvierling 38 quadruple self-propelled flak gun near the front lines near Roslavl. The gun itself is well emplaced on high ground in order to command all possible approaches.



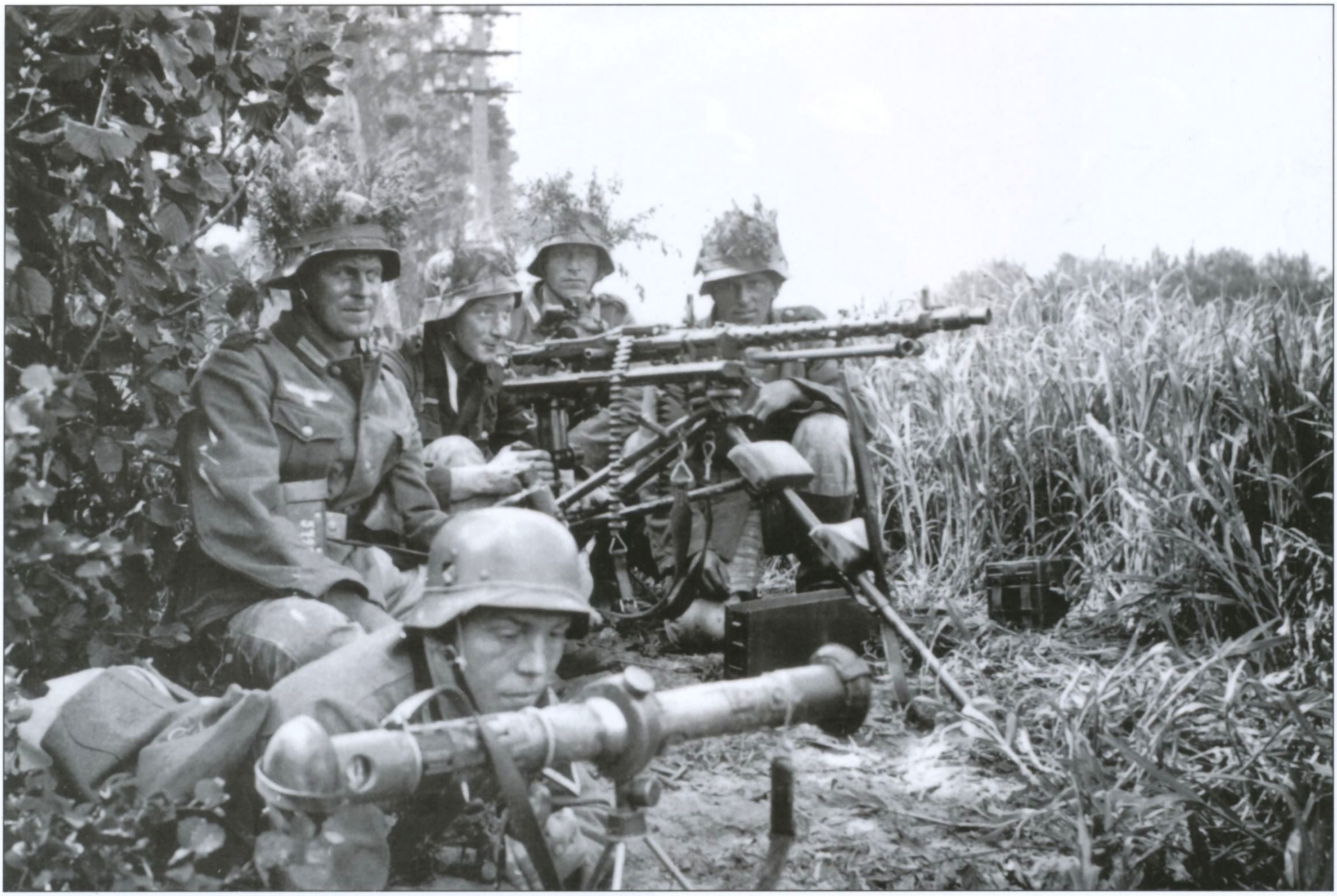
An MG34 light machine gun crew rest during a lull in the fighting. The machine gunner can be seen standing resting with his MG34. The weapon's 50-round ammunition belt has been placed around the back of his neck, with the bullets pointing outward to prevent them digging into his body.



An 8cm s.GrW34 mortar crew in action against Soviet positions near Roslavl. German mortar crews always possessed the ability to engage in and out of action rapidly. They paid considerable attention to pre-registration and other fire control aids. The enterprising German mortar crews were able to bring fire down rapidly on their adversary.



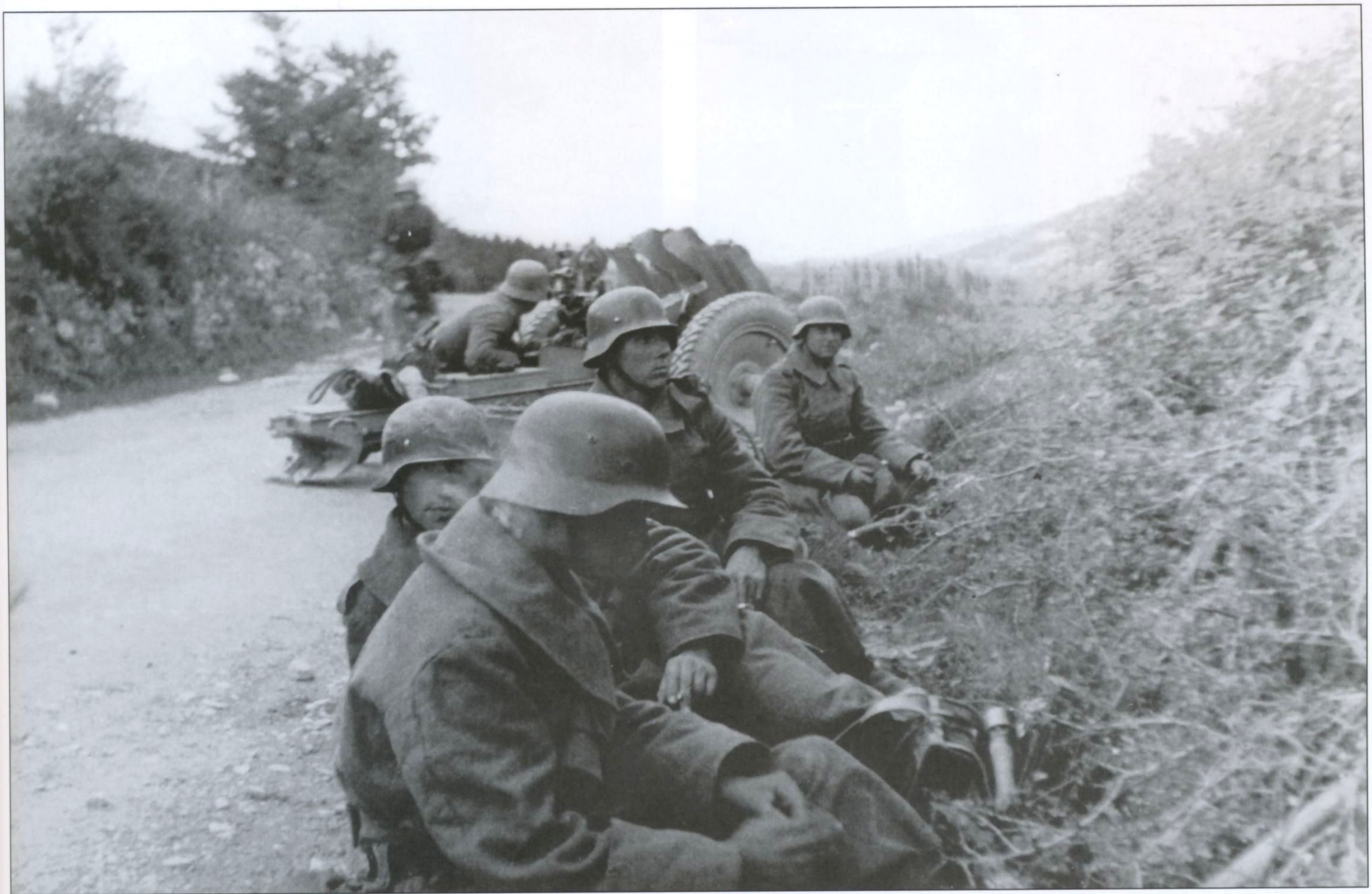
The crew of a 5cm PaK38 preparing their weapon for action. When the 3.7cm PaK35/36 became obsolete, the 5cm PaK38 became its replacement and saw service almost from the beginning of the battles on the Ostfront.



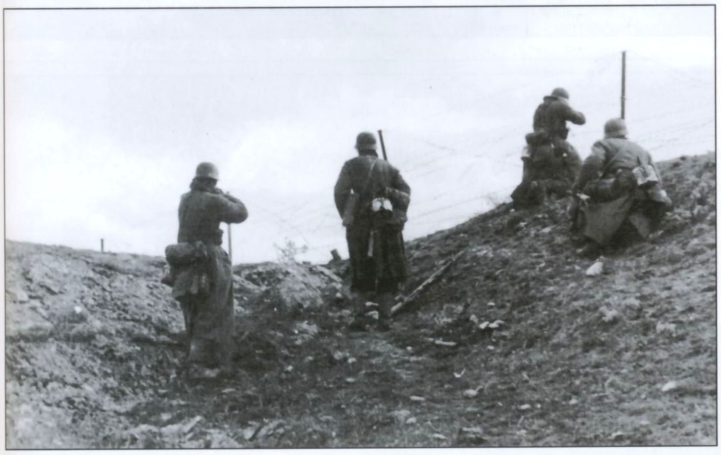
In a field is a heavy MG34 machine gun squad. The MG34 is mounted on a sustained fire-mount. One of the squad is using an optical range finder, which is mounted on a tripod. In every infantry battalion there fielded eight MG34 heavy machine guns on the sustained-fire mount, which was regarded in 1941, more than enough to keep open the flanks for attacking infantry.

Infantrymen quickly move forward across open terrain during what appears to be an attack on an enemy position. These Landser are all very well-equipped. Many of them are wearing the standard kit which consisted of the leather belt with support straps, ammunition pouches, combat harness for mess kit and "Zeltbahn" camouflage rain cape/shelter quarters, an entrenching tool, a bread bag, bayonet, gasmask canister and field flashlight.

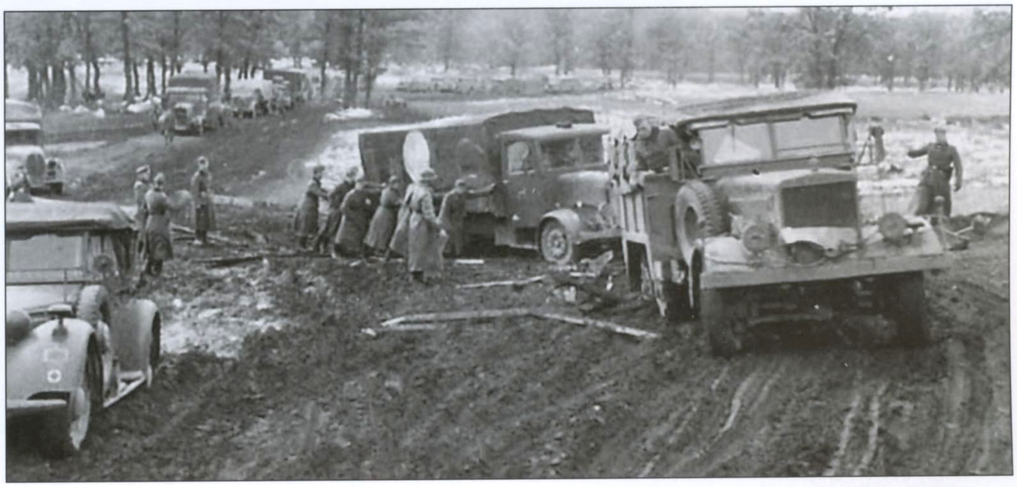
Troops move forward towards Roslavl following the successful encirclement of Soviet troops in what became known as the Smolensk Pocket. Due to the long distances in which the infantry had to march they constantly improvised to make their journey more comfortable. Here soldiers have utilized horse drawn carts to tow much of their personal kit including some of their weapons.



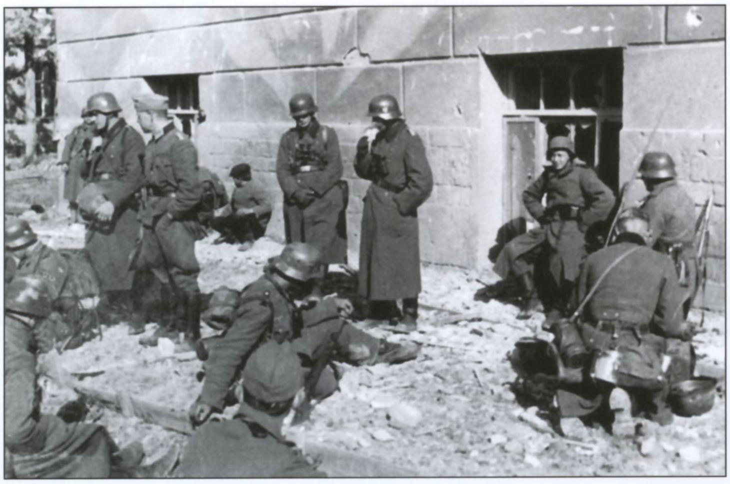
Infantry wearing the M35 steel helmet and standard army issue Greatcoat worn over their M36 service tunic have taken cover behind a hedge on a road somewhere in the vicinity of Roslavl. One of the regiment's 7.5cm l.IG18 field guns can be seen positioned overlooking open terrain.



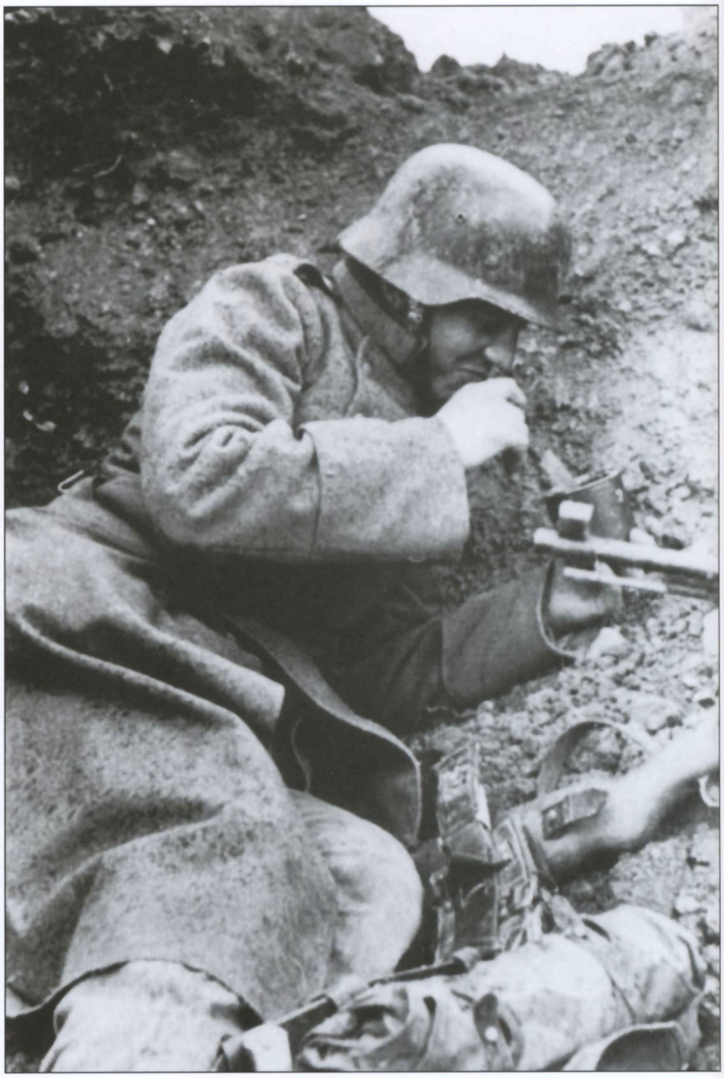
A group of infantry have utilized a bomb crater to protect themselves from enemy fire during an attack on a building. All the soldiers are wearing the Greatcoat over their uniform and wear a variety of kit including support straps which carry ammunition pouches. They are also wearing the combat harness for their mess kit and "Zeltbahn", an entrenching tool carrier, a bread bag for rations, and a gas mask canister.



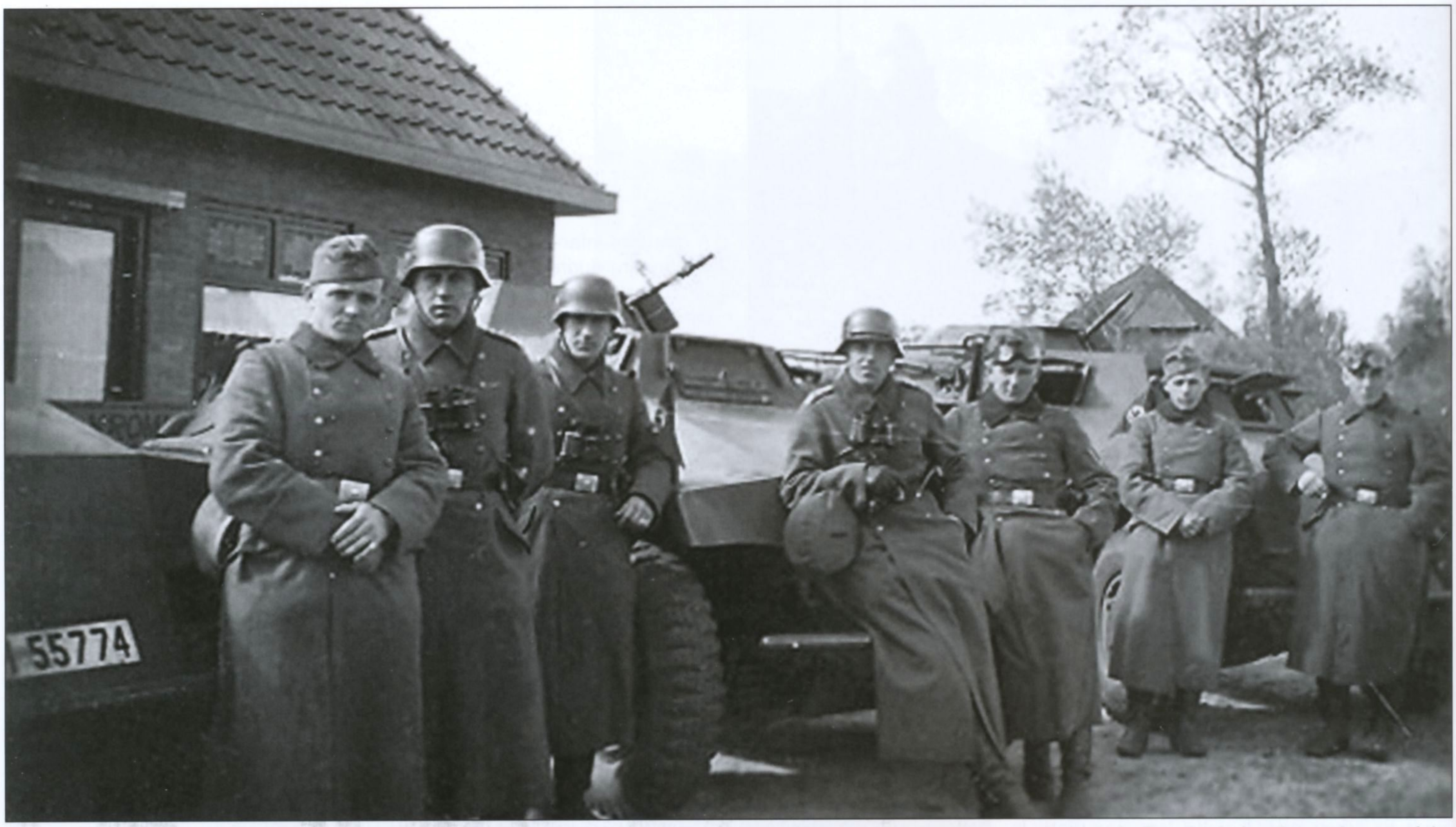
A common scene in central Russia, even during the summer months when there was heavy rain. Here motor vehicles struggle along the dirt roads after rain has turned the dusty rutty road into mud. As a result of heavy traffic the dirt roads were constantly being churned up and created even greater problems for the vehicles following in the rear.



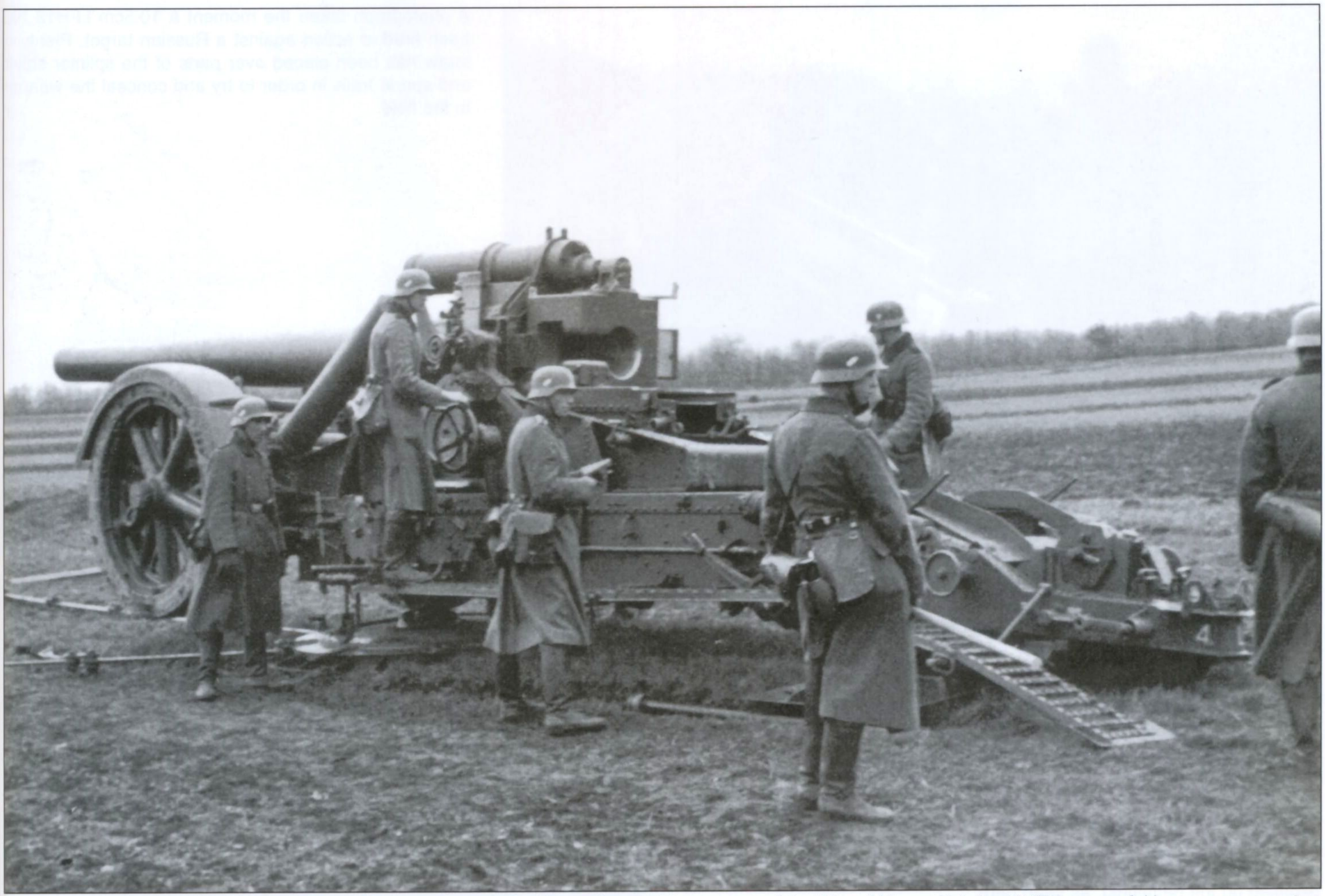
Following intensive fighting against an enemy position, troops can be seen resting among the debris. A number of the soldiers are wearing the standard issue Greatcoat. The Greatcoat has been correctly worn buttoned up to the neck.



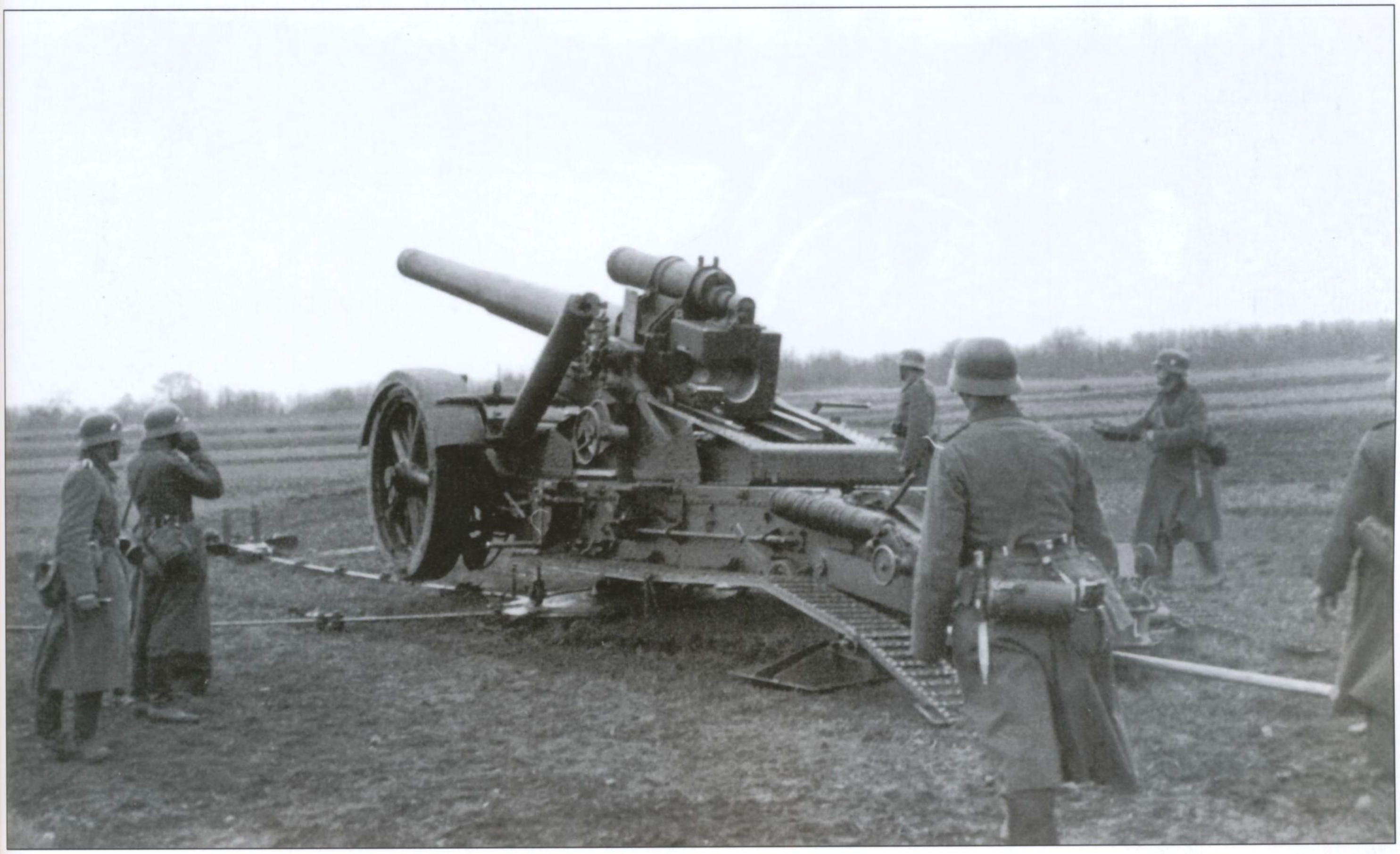
A soldier pauses for a break in the fighting and tucks into his rations inside a bomb crater. He wears the M35 steel helmet and the standard issue Greatcoat, which is being worn with the collar turned up around the wearer's neck and lower part of the face. A small cloth flap was buttoned across the throat and attached to a small button on the opposite side of the coat.

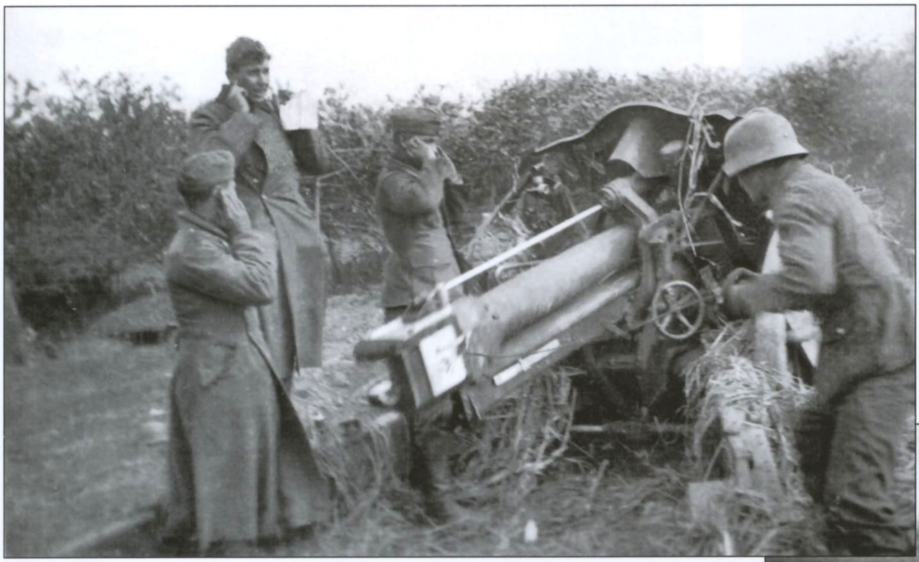


A group of soldiers stand in front of three Sd.Kfz.221 light armored cars. These four-wheeled vehicles were used widely in Russia during the early part of the campaign and were operated by a two man crew and mounted a single 7.92mm MG34 as its main armament.

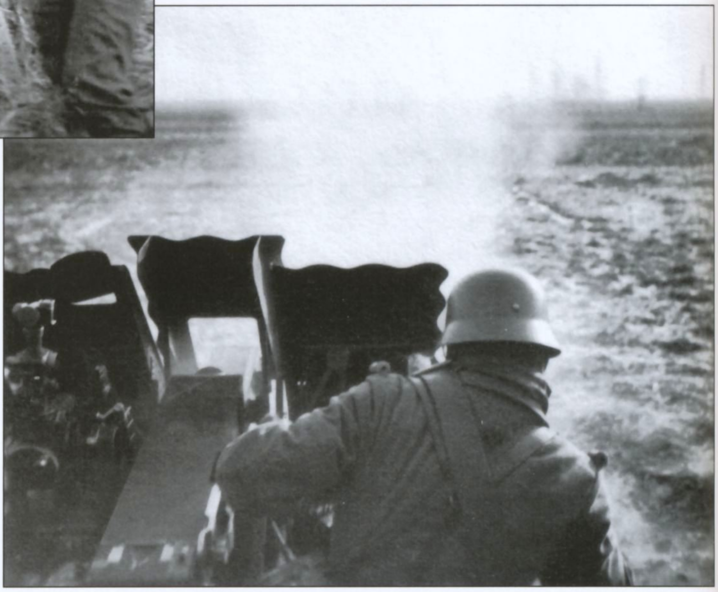


Two photographs showing the same 21cm Mörser being readied for action, which was part of the 21cm Mörser-Abt. (mot.). This powerful long range, counter-battery gun was mounted in a 'mortar style' carriage that allowed very high elevation. The 21cm Mörser proved to be one of the best heavy guns in service in 1941, and had an impressive range, but it was never a common weapon.

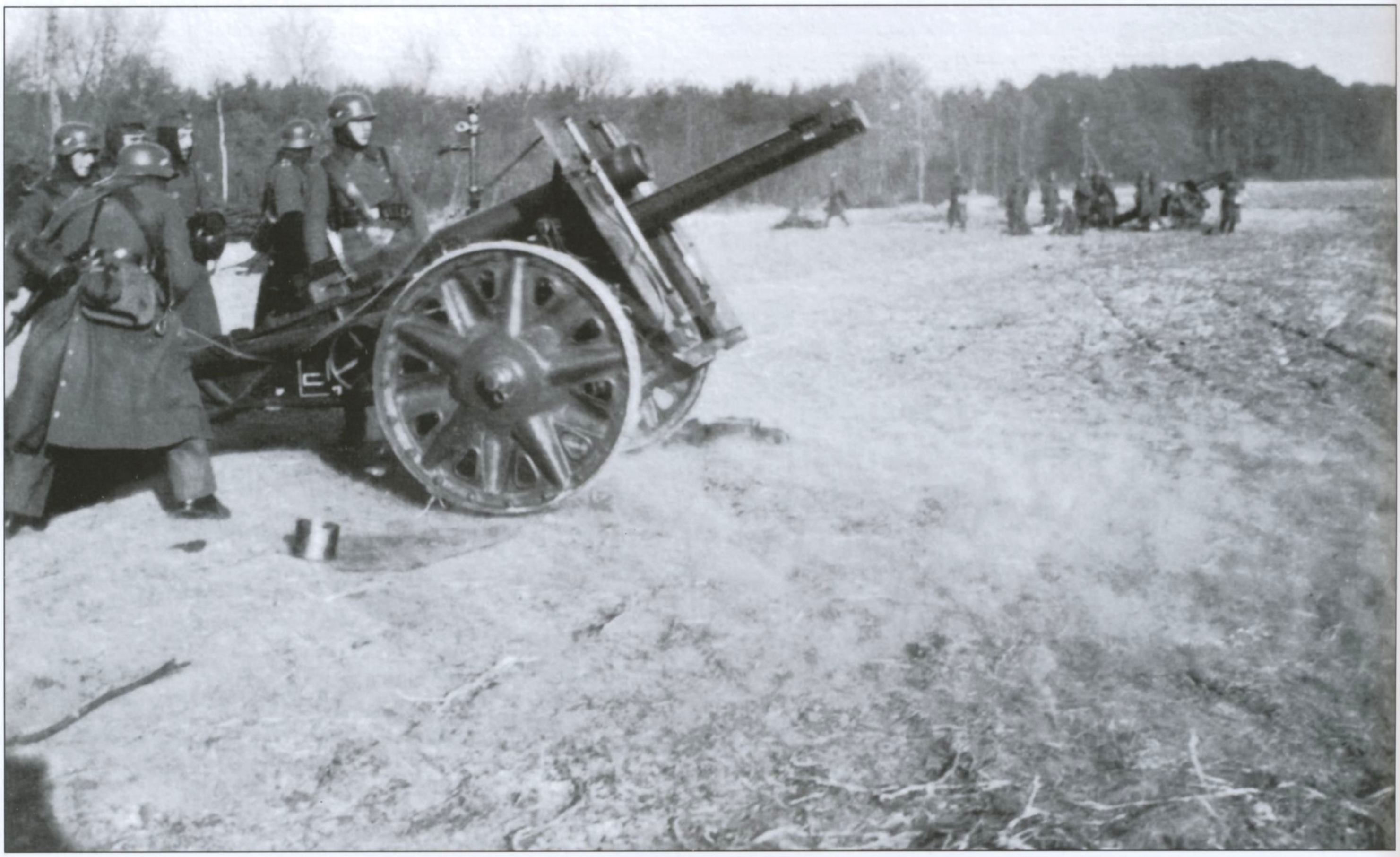




A photograph taken the moment a 10.5cm l.FH18 has been fired in action against a Russian target. Plenty of straw has been placed over parts of the splinter shield and spade trails in order to try and conceal the weapon in the field.



A 7.5cm l.IG18 is seen here in action. This particular weapon was used in direct infantry support. The gun was very versatile in combat and the crew often aggressively positioned it, which usually meant the piece was regularly exposed on the battlefield, as seen here.



Two 15cm s.IG33 infantry guns from a regiment's infantry gun company being used against an enemy target. Much of the infantry regiments used on the Eastern Front were horse mounted and these heavy guns were almost invariably brought to the front by horse drawn transport.

ISBN 962-361-173-0

CONCORD
PUBLICATIONS COMPANY